NEW

Senior's MINDFULNESS

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The benefits of being active

BUILD BETTER RELATIONSHIPS
Reclaim old friendships and make new ones

From 9-5 to RETIREMENT

How will you handle life's biggest change?

Learn to let go

The art of accepting & moving on

FIND YOUR purpose

It's finally time to pursue those life goals!

Digital Edition

SIXTH EDITION

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Transform your life with food

The perks of yoga • 5 strange facts about memories • Embrace different cultures

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WELCOME

Retirement can be hard to adjust to – finding yourself out of the workplace and with so much time to fill can be a daunting prospect, and many people struggle to truly embrace the freedom that retiring offers. Over the following pages of this brand-new book, find out how practicing mindfulness can help with these new feelings and improve your life significantly, from finding a new purpose in life, to practicing meditation. Read up on how to reconnect with old friends and make new ones, and learn about how you can embrace your new awareness around the home.

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FUTURE

Senior's MINDFULNESS

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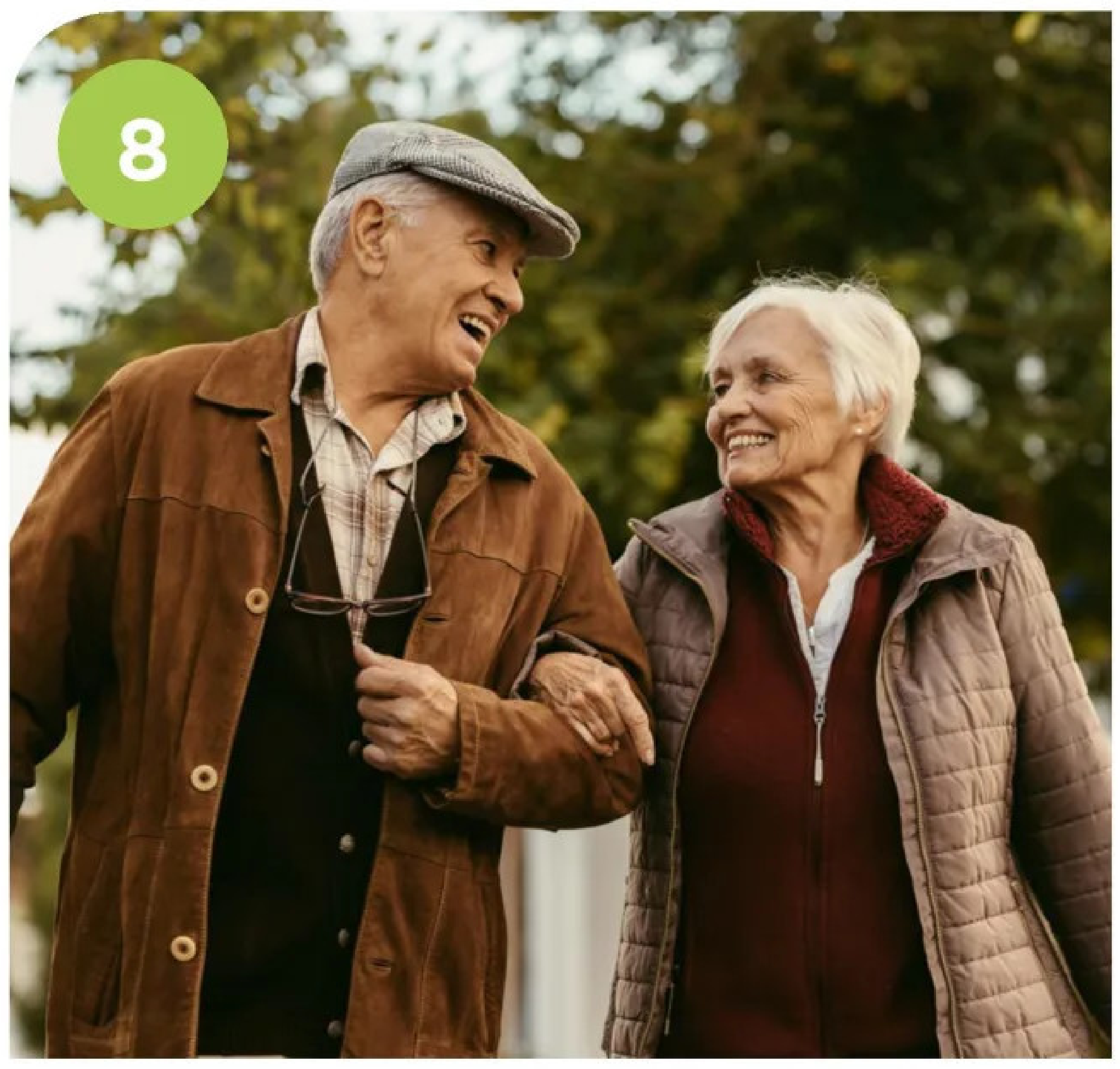

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ADJUSTING TO RETIREMENT

Even if you've been looking forward to stopping work for a long time, making the transition from the 9-5 to being retired can come with its own challenges. Julie Bassett explores how mindfulness can help you with the change

When it comes to preparing for retirement, it's likely that you have taken care of all the practical concerns, such as arranging your finance, handing over work tasks and maybe even downsizing your home. But what many of us are not prepared for is the emotional impact that the transition from full-time work to full-time retirement can have.

It is a major life event, and like any life-changing situation it can come with its highs and lows. After years of working long hours and adhering to a strict daily schedule, the thought of being free to do as you wish every day can seem like a dream. You've probably spent time thinking about the hobbies you want to take up, the places you want to visit and the books you're going to read.

However, it doesn't always turn out to be the nirvana you've been imagining, at least not immediately. Many of us can feel a little lost when we stop working. It can be quite overwhelming to realise that we are now responsible for ourselves. If you want to see people, you need to make plans to do so. If you want to start that hobby, join a club or go for a walk, it needs that spark of motivation to take the first step. That daily grind of going to work at the same time every day might have felt hard at the time, but it takes a lot of decision-making away from you. We often crave routine as it helps to make sense of life.

Bringing in mindfulness

It's common to feel a little directionless at first. Your retirement could last decades, so it's important that you start to discover a new meaning for your life so you can enjoy your retirement and do all those things that you planned to.

And this is where mindfulness comes in. Even if you've never tried mindfulness before, or you have dabbled in the past, there are lessons to be learned. Mindfulness, when executed correctly, can have a positive impact on your overall health and wellbeing, helping you to find a new joy in life and really live your retirement to its fullest. And that's not to mention the physical benefits, which we will explore elsewhere in this book in more detail, such as better mental health, reduced risk of some illnesses and increased longevity, which will all make your retirement more enjoyable.

Mindfulness can sound a bit 'alternative' if you're coming to it for the first time, but it's actually a skill that we can all benefit from. It is a process that helps to increase our own awareness of the present moment by focusing on how we think, feel and act at any given time.

By focusing on the present, we can let go of the past, which is important if you are finding that you are constantly comparing your old working self with your new retired self. It also means not worrying about things that might or might not happen in the future, which can overwhelm our thoughts and prevent us from enjoying each day as it comes. By practising mindfulness regularly, you can become more aware of your thoughts and feelings, and in time learn to manage them better.

It doesn't come naturally to many of us, and can be especially hard to start with when you are going through such a big life change as retirement. Your mind is probably filled with chaotic thoughts that are hard to switch off. There is no right or wrong way to practise mindfulness, and some methods work better than others for different people.

Mindful practice

Mindfulness is often associated with meditation, and this is often a person's first introduction to the concept. You can try meditation yourself without any guidance – we have an in-depth guide to meditation later in this book to get you started. The aim of meditation is that you learn to recognise your thoughts more, and train yourself to come back to the present moment if your mind drifts. If you need more formal guidance, there are a number of apps available, such as Calm or Headspace, that have meditations you can listen to. You follow the instructions, while noticing when your mind wanders and gently drawing it back. You could also join meditation groups in your area for communal practice if you find this preferable.

Other forms of mindfulness are more active and can be popular with those newly retired as they feel more hands-on. For example, there are mindful walking groups cropping up in many towns and cities, or you could go to a yoga class. As well as benefitting from the exercise, you will learn to switch off busy thoughts and focus on the sights and sounds around you, thinking only about the present moment. It also helps with meeting new people – your social circle can suddenly get smaller after retirement, so joining a group like this can really help you in more ways than one.

The concept of mindfulness can be applied to anything and everything you do. If you're driving somewhere and find yourself stuck in traffic, rather than feeling stressed by it, you can practise being present in the moment to help calm your mind. If there is something you enjoy, such as colouring, knitting or puzzles, you can absorb your mind into these tasks not allowing any outside thoughts to disturb you, enabling you to get full joy from the task.

5 WAYS TO BE MINDFUL EVERY DAY

Build mindfulness into your daily routine and it will soon become second nature

1 MORNING FOCUS

Every morning, start the day with five minutes of meditation. This helps you to get into the right mindset for the day. You can do this in bed before getting up; just lie still for a few minutes, concentrate on your breath and empty your mind of any worries or thoughts.

2 GET OUTSIDE

Every day, plan something that will get you outside, whether it's a walk to the shops or a hike around your local heathland. Spending time in nature lifts our moods and decreases stress. Take in all the things you can see and hear, and absorb yourself in where you are.

3 ENJOY YOUR FOOD

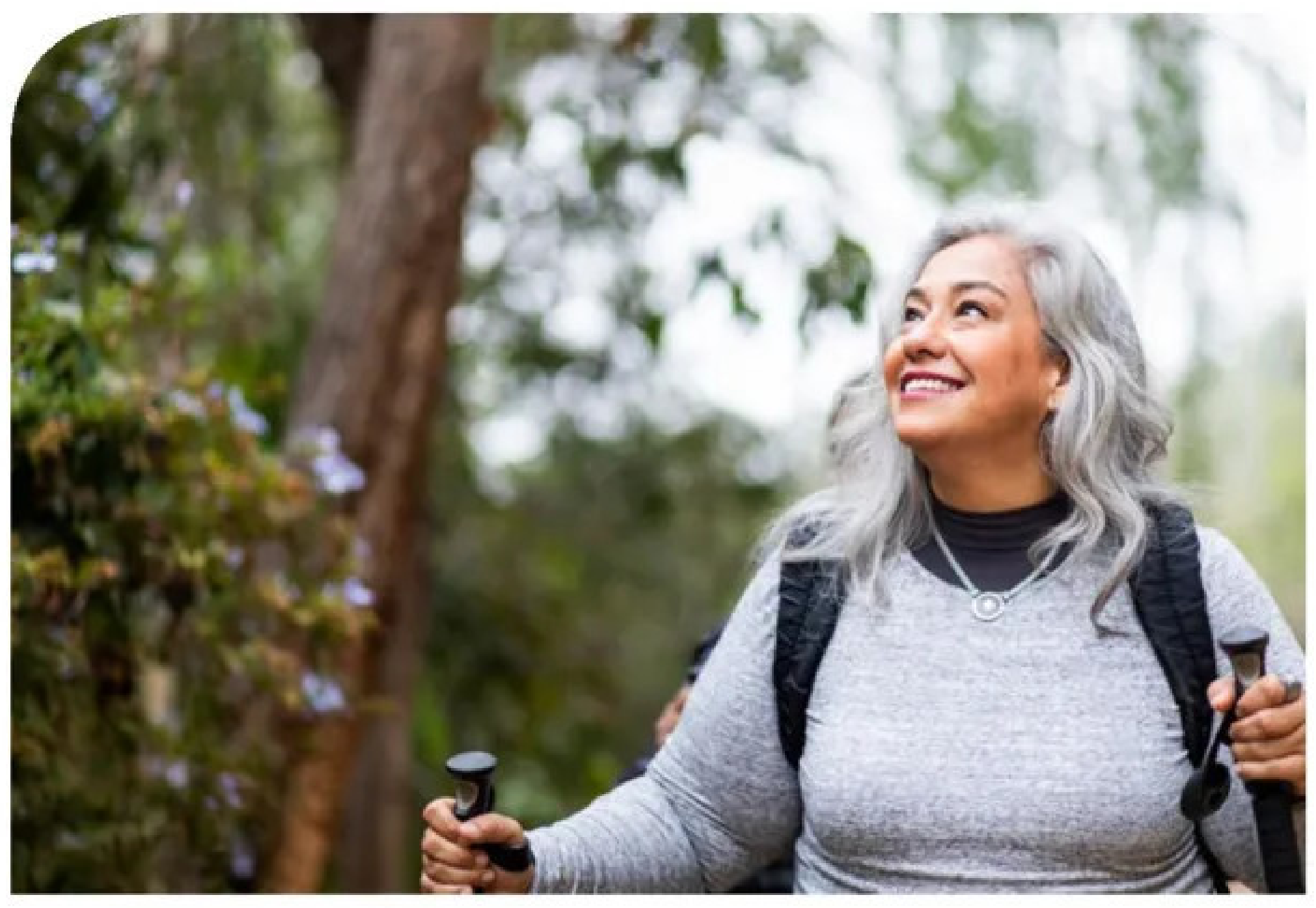
Cooking and eating are great ways to practise mindfulness. Focus on the ingredients, the process of cooking a healthy meal and eat slowly. Enjoy every bite.

4 PRACTISE GRATITUDE

Gratitude can have an uplifting effect on your wellbeing. Take a moment each day to consider those things and people you are grateful for on that particular day, focusing on the positives.

5 EMPTY YOUR BRAIN

Before bed, use a journal to write down any thoughts or fears from the day so that they don't carry with you into sleep. Also note down any tasks for the next day.



> "It's important not to expect an overnight result.
> Adapting to change takes time, so practising mindfulness
> every day will help you work through your new lifestyle"

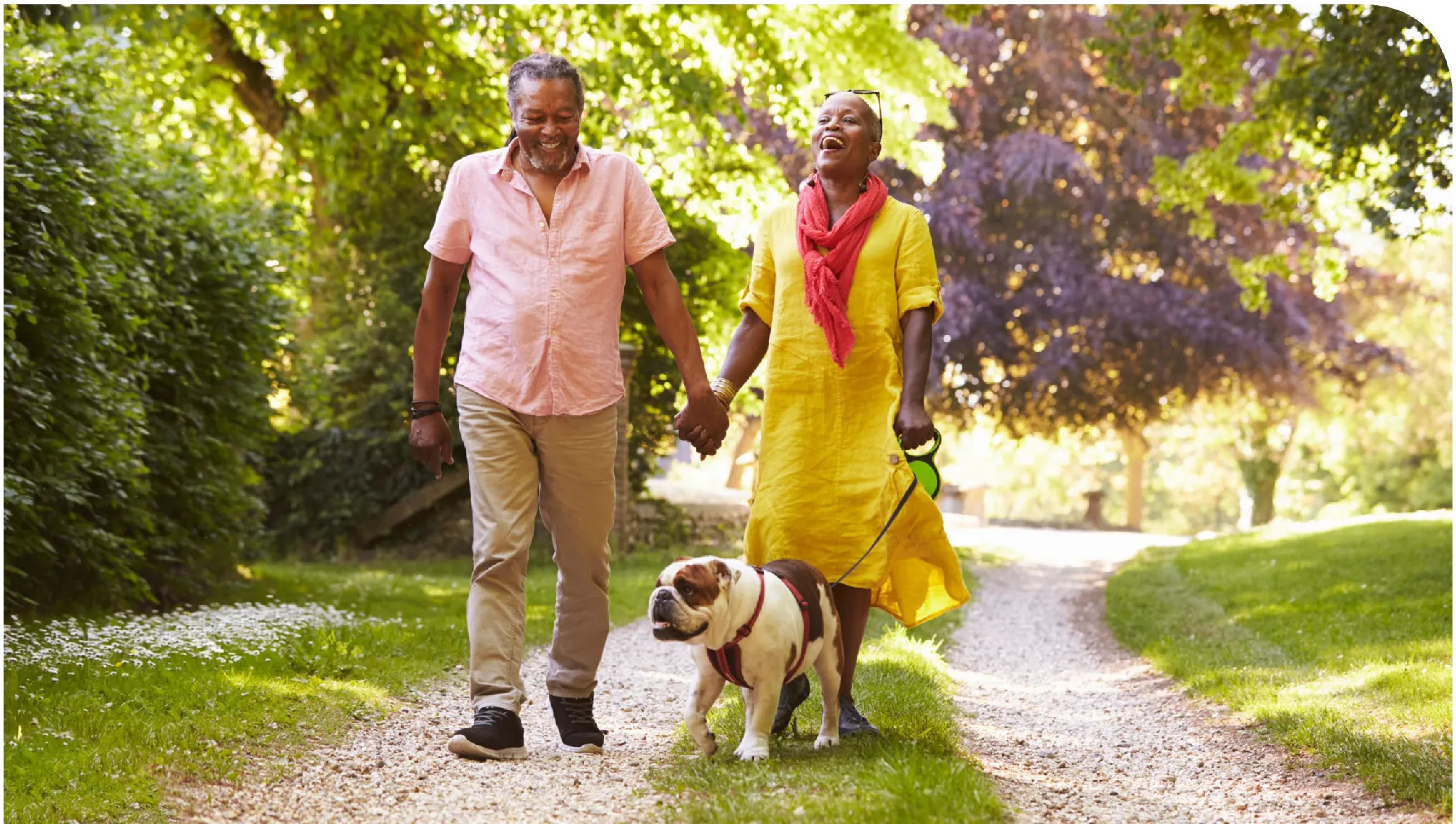
Coping with change

But why practise any form of mindfulness after retiring? The biggest positive is that it can help you to discover new meaning in your life. It's very easy to fall into a rut without work to pass the time. You might experience feelings of loneliness, a lack of purpose or a low mood. Mindfulness gives you the time and space to recognise your feelings, without judgement. It gives you the chance to acknowledge that things have changed and that you feel certain things as a result of that. By letting thoughts come into your mind, giving them time to be recognised and then gently letting them go, you can start to build a more positive mindset that will carry you through your day-to-day life.

It's important not to expect an overnight result. Adapting to change takes time, so practising mindfulness every day, even if only for a few minutes, will help you work through your new lifestyle. It's about giving yourself permission to say goodbye to the life you led before retirement, and easing into your retired life gradually, accepting your new lifestyle.

A journal is a very helpful tool, as it enables you to write down any thoughts and feelings you have about your life change. Writing them down can help you to release them from your mind. It also gives you a chance to reflect on the things you have written and see them almost from a distance, putting them into perspective. You can also use your journal to write down any goals you want to achieve and help you focus on them.

Mindfulness helps you to embrace the change in a more positive manner. When you are faced with a tough situation, you can stop and take a minute to acknowledge your feelings, consider why you feel that way and guide yourself through. For example, if you wake up and feel a bit lost, with no plans for the day, take a minute and reframe your thinking from 'I don't know what to do with myself', which is quite negative, to 'I have the freedom to follow my own path today', which is far more positive. Then write down your goals for the day, even if they are simple, such as do the shopping or go for a walk. Focus on each task individually as you move through your day and engage fully in it, before moving on to the next. It's surprising how much difference this can make, adding a new richness to your life.



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FINDING PURPOSE WHEN YOU HAVE RETIRED

Retirement presents a number of challenges, including an unexpected amount of free time, and with it, perhaps, a loss of identity. Retirement could be the ideal time to tackle the big things you always wanted to do, explains Olly Tew

While people still working may imagine retirement to be an endless holiday, it can actually be a deeply challenging time for those who are making the transition from full or part-time work. The most common obstacle for the newly retired to overcome is, in a sense, a loss of identity.

Whatever you did for work prior to retiring, whether you were a teacher, an office worker, a bank manager, or any other role, you are now in the new category of 'the newly retired'. There was a level of expertise and responsibility that made you an asset to the place you worked, and now that feeling of inclusion in a bigger organisation has gone. It can be very tempting to continue to define yourself by what you used to do, perhaps refer to yourself as a 'retired science teacher' or a 'retired police officer', because this still gives you a mental link to this earlier stage of your life that you felt most comfortable in.

However, this is not necessarily the best way to start your retirement. You shouldn't define who you are by something that is no longer happening, in the same way you grew out of the habit of defining yourself by which artists you listened to as a teenager. Retirement is a new and important stage of your life, and it should be treated as such.

A tough part of retirement that many people face is a sense of 'lack of purpose', for a number of reasons. Whether your time was previously occupied with full or part-time work, or you defined yourself as a homemaker who cared for other members of the family, retirement often brings a feeling of 'purpose' being removed.

Now that you are retired, you don't have the same duties and responsibilities that you had before, and instead of this you have much more free time. The combination of these two facts can lead many to feel that they serve no use to society, or that they are actually a burden on it. These can be very strong feelings, but they are certainly not objectively true. You are still of great use to society and you will find a new purpose that is suited to life as a retired person, where you have much more time to be a positive benefit in your community. With the increase in free time, it is possible you may have an even bigger impact than when you were working!

What this guide will do is help you consider the options when discovering this new purpose, and hopefully inspire you to look at retirement with a sense of excitement.

“Invest your time and energy into what is really important to you, and discover new things that you are truly excited about”

WHERE CAN WE FIND OUR NEW SENSE OF PURPOSE?

Adapting to retired life and finding a new purpose can be a challenge, but as has often been pointed out, many challenges are opportunities in disguise. The opportunity that retirement offers is based on the additional time you now have. You can invest your time and energy into what is really important to you, and discover new things that you are truly excited about. A new sense of purpose can be found in any of the areas below, but there is no need to focus on just one of them! Your sense of purpose is based on who you are as a unique person, and there is more than one element that makes you 'you'.

Volunteering

Volunteering is a popular choice for newly retired people because it can add a sense of structure to your free time. If, for example, you know you are helping out three mornings or evenings a week, that's three regular appointments in your weekly calendar that you must fit your other interests around, requiring you to take care when planning. There is also a great sense of purpose when working for a charity that inspires you, or that you feel is very important to your local community. There might be a local project already running that means a lot to you, like the preservation of a local beauty spot, or endangered wildlife. Alternatively, you can think about volunteering for more national or international charities. With so many issues that are causing people significant hardship, the areas in which you can help are very varied, from working with or campaigning for food banks, LGBT+ groups, refugee support, hospice work etc. You can either help directly, by working with people who need support, or you can help at a distance, by campaigning and fundraising for their charities. And if there isn't a charity addressing an issue that you know and care about, why not set it up yourself?

Looking after your health

While volunteering is a great way to look after others, make sure you are not neglecting yourself. You can't help others to the best of your ability if you are also not living healthily, and some of the extra time you have as a retired person should be spent on self-care. You don't need to train for a marathon but it is important to keep your body active (and if you've got the runner's instinct, go for it!).

#1: DISCOVER WHO YOU WANT TO BE NOW

In this mindfulness activity, think about where you want to start this new life stage

To begin with, we're going to settle into a state of mindful thinking. Do this however you feel comfortable, whether that is focusing on your breathing, imagining you're somewhere in nature etc. Stay in this meditation, reminding yourself to gently push out any thoughts that are intruding. After a few minutes, start to consider yourself, and what feels important to you. What feels most important that you focus on? Your family? Your local community? Is there a cause that you're already thinking about supporting? If not, don't worry. Just think about the kind of work that you could potentially do with your new-found free time. Just breathe and think about the various options that come to the top of your mind. Do any of them resonate particularly strongly with you?

We'll stay in this meditative, mindful state for a little longer. Think about living for yourself. Consider the things you could start to do, things you've never tried before. Are any coming to mind quite strongly? Are they things that will enrich your life? Try to keep a list in your mind about which you want to try and what you want to explore, so that when you come out of the mindful state, you can write them down.

This is even more important if the job you used to do involved being on your feet a lot. Even a local walking group would be an excellent way to stay fit, as well as connect with new people. Swimming, cycling and hiking are all great ways to stay in shape, and if you live near the sea or a large river, there is also kayaking.

Maintaining connections generally is also an important part of staying healthy, especially with friends and family. It doesn't need to be your new life's purpose, but it's great to be able to share stories about what you're doing with the people you care about. Finally, take a bit of extra time to invest in cooking. Eating well is always important, and it is never too late to learn to cook a new cuisine, or practise gourmet. If you can find a way to combine these essential habits, like cooking a meal for friends and family on a regular basis, this will help build a healthy foundation from which your new aims and goals can emerge.

Hobbies, education and expertise

Keeping your body active through volunteering and exercise is an excellent habit to form, but one that involves the mind is even more important. Retirement gives you more time to invest in your earlier pastimes, but why not try something completely new?

There are so many hobbies that you can pick up when you've retired. If you haven't explored your artistic side before, now is the perfect time to start with painting or photography. Your personal history gives you a unique perspective that should be recorded in some way. Visiting galleries and following artists on the internet means that finding inspiration that speaks to you has never been easier, and there are usually local galleries that will be happy to showcase your work. If you want to work with your hands then woodworking, carpentry and crafting ceramics are excellent new skills to learn, with many courses and classes available to teach you the fundamentals. If you have a garage, or other large workspace, you've got room to set up your own workshop or studio. This would be perfect for trying out several different hobbies, and discovering which of them appeals to you most.

While you are learning new skills, you can also take the time to go back to the classroom to learn something else. That can be something as simple as a night

class in a subject you've found to be interesting, or working towards a qualification at a distance (eg the Open University). Whatever it was you did in work, it's never too late to become an expert in something completely different. You may discover a new-found interest in a new subject that grows to potentially even teaching others. There's no reason you can't become an expert in something that inspires you. Whether it's biology, a distant period of history, or even a new language, the joy of learning something completely new is always an option, and there have never been more routes to following that path. The great thing about following a path in education when you're retired is that no one chooses what you study but you.

Starting and finishing *that* lifelong goal

One thing that most of us can identify with is that there was that one thing you always wanted to do, but working life got in the way. For many of us, there is more than just 'one thing', but all of us can easily identify one challenge or goal that we really loved the idea of doing. Something really *big*, like travelling for a year in a mobile home, painting a masterpiece, writing a book, running a marathon, or seeing the Northern Lights. There were always reasons why you couldn't do it, usually to do with work, but also concerns about money, or upsetting a family dynamic. It's likely that a lot of those concerns have now become smaller, but even if they haven't, there's nothing to stop you from planning for the future. You don't need to pack your bags tomorrow, or even pick up your paintbrush, but you can certainly get a piece of paper and start planning it. Even if you don't 'start' for a year, there's probably a lot to do in the meantime, such as travel plans, practising or arranging family care (if you look after your children's children, for example).

Retirement may bring feelings of being used up, and being unable to complete that lifelong goal, but it is far more likely that you have never had the freedom and opportunity to achieve these goals than you do right now. If you need to alter your plans because of a change in circumstance (for example, running a marathon might be beyond your knees, but what about long-distance cycling, or swimming?) that doesn't equate to any kind of failure, or being too old. It only means you need a slight readjusting of your aim. The will to attempt a personal goal and the triumph of completing it are never diminished by age. In fact, the taste of victory might be all the sweeter for it.

GETTING STARTED ON FINDING THAT NEW PURPOSE

One of the scariest aspects of retirement is the huge amount of time you have and the responsibility of making the 'right' decision. But the truth is that there are likely many right decisions for you, and you can make more than one of them. Remember that the decision must work for you and you alone, and if you know someone doing something different with their new-found time, be supportive of them, but don't try to copy them completely.

Also, it's important to remember you've got the freedom to change your mind. If volunteering somewhere for a time doesn't give you as much fulfilment as you thought, then don't continue that kind of volunteering. There are so many ways in which you can find a new and fruitful, fulfilling purpose, and there is no need to do anything that you don't enjoy. You've always got the opportunity to have another deep think about what you want to do, and there is never a 'too late to change your mind' moment, when you've retired. It's also worth reflecting that unlike every other stage of your life up until now, there is very little training about 'how to do' your retirement, and what retirement means has dramatically changed over the last 30 years or so. It doesn't necessarily involve endless rounds of golf and tea shops, unless that's what you really want to do. It can involve reaching the summit of mountains, writing moving poetry, starting a community group, or rebuilding a classic car you've always wanted to own.

With all of these big decisions to think on, it's very easy to get overwhelmed and feel disheartened or anxious about this next step in your life. This is a good time to practise your mindful thinking. There is no need to rush your decision and it's always better to make life-changing choices when your mind feels clear and at rest.

#2: WORK OUT WHAT YOU WANT TO DO NOW

You've just had some great ideas about what you want to do with your retired time. Now it's time to pick a big project

This should be done after you've picked a few different goals to focus on in the first activity, and when you're more used to being in a mindful state. Spend a little longer in the breathing, focusing state, and remember to push out all intrusive thoughts for a few minutes, before you let your mind begin to roam. Now you are gently going to imagine yourself planning your big project. Where are you? Is it in a workshop, or looking at a map of the world? Are you looking at sports gear? Are you sketching out ideas for a novel? If you haven't got that far, imagine you're looking at a blank piece of paper, and just write down words that come to mind when you think of yourself and your new project. Think about the times you used to be really busy with work or family, and remember what you used to daydream about. Seeing the most beautiful sights of the world? Painting a picture of your house? Climbing mountains? What comes to mind? Is there one particular thing that stands out that you never had a chance to follow? Open your eyes, and write down the words that best describe that unfollowed path.

Images, All Getty Images

THE SCIENCE OF STRESS

What happens to your body when it's put under pressure? Laura Mears explains all

The man who first defined stress, Hans Selye, once told reporters: "Everyone knows what stress is, but nobody really knows." From a mental health perspective, stress describes the feeling of excessive emotional pressure. It can manifest itself as anxiety, trouble sleeping, altered eating patterns, destructive behaviour, headaches or muscle pain. This is the stress we are all familiar with. But, from a broader biological perspective, stress is the body's response to any kind of disruption, whether it's psychological trauma, extreme temperature, lack of food, or confrontation with a predator.

There's no proper medical definition of stress, but when it comes to biology, it describes any threat to the body's normal balance. In order to cope with that threat – whether it's real or imagined – the body takes several steps in order to protect itself. The bloodstream floods with chemical signals that heighten awareness, increase heart rate, quicken breathing, dull pain, and even induce euphoria. At the same time, non-essential functions, such as digestion and growth, slow right down. When the stress response is activated, survival becomes the key concern; the future is less vital.

The brain kick-starts the stress response. The amygdala, which deals with emotion and fear, sends a message to the hypothalamus, setting off a chain of electrical and chemical messages that prepare the body to respond. The first step is to put the nervous system into 'fight or flight' mode. It does this by signalling to the adrenal glands to increase production of adrenaline.

This chemical messenger surges into the bloodstream, triggering a wave of energy release by raiding the body's stores of fats and glycogen. Blood sugar rises and fatty acids are released to fuel the body in its time of need. These molecules are then shuttled to the muscles and brain by the bloodstream. Blood vessels in non-essential areas constrict, heart rate increases and breathing becomes faster, diverting extra resources to the places that need them most. Senses become heightened and the brain is put on alert. This response happens instantly, sometimes even before the conscious brain has processed it.

Depending on the situation – and the individual – the exact pattern of these chemical surges differs. If escape or confrontation is not an option, another response, known as 'aversive vigilance' might replace 'fight or flight'. Under these circumstances, movement stops, and blood is diverted away from the skin and extremities to the organs in the core. Rather than revving the body up for

THE STRESS RESPONSE

The body has a well-tuned system for dealing with the first signs of stress

1. HYPOTHALAMUS

This part of the brain is responsible for maintaining balance in the body, and it kicks off the stress response.

2. PITUITARY

This pea-sized organ produces many hormones, including the stress messenger adrenocorticotropic hormone.

3. ADRENALS

These glands are found on top of the kidneys, and produce steroids in response to stress.

4. CORTICOTROPIN RELEASING FACTOR

This chemical messenger carries the stress signal from the hypothalamus to the pituitary.

5. ADRENOCORTICOTROPIC HORMONE

This hormone travels through the bloodstream, carrying the chemical message to the kidneys.

6. CORTISOL

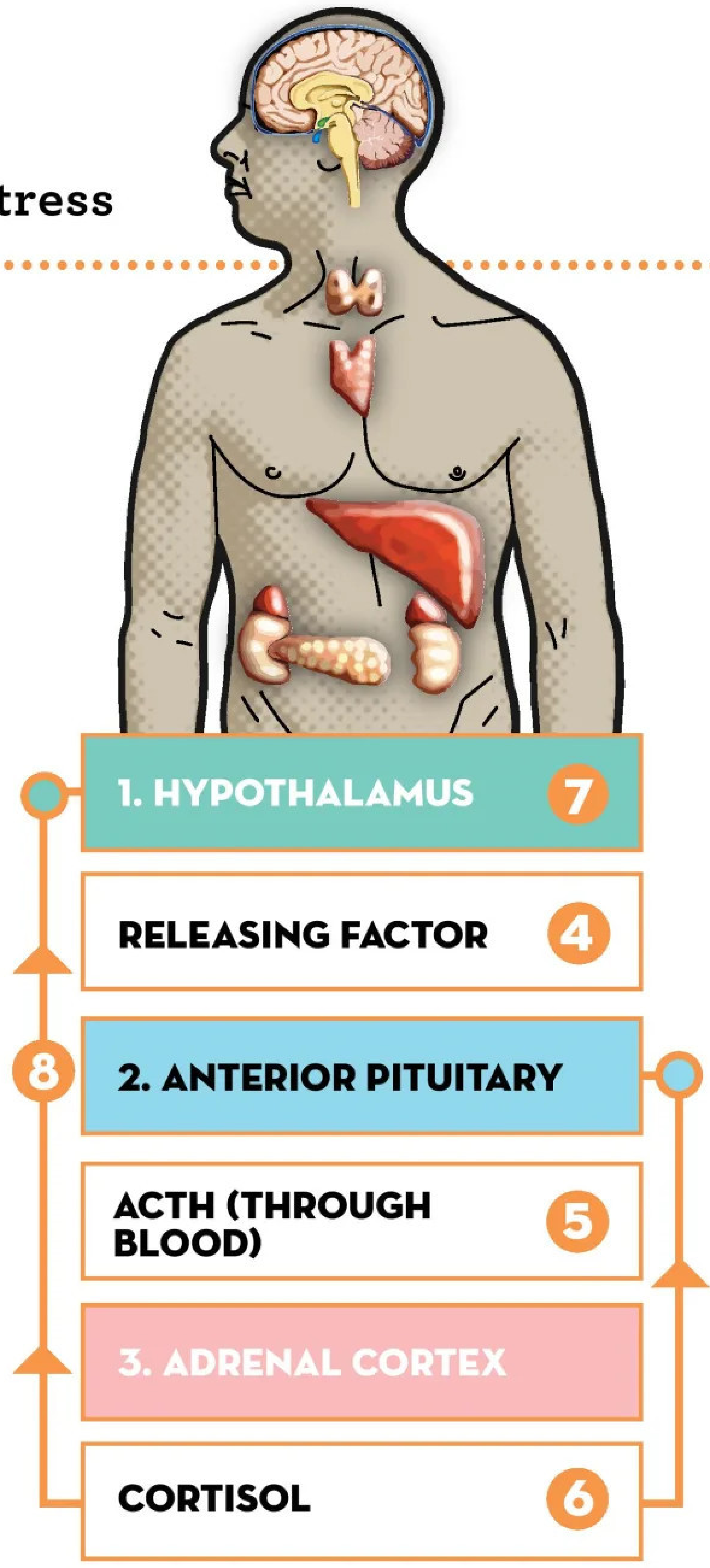
These natural steroids trigger changes across the body, helping it to deal with stress.

7. ACTIVATION

Several areas of the brain feed into the hypothalamus, triggering the stress response.

8. SUPPRESSION

High levels of glucocorticoids in the blood feed back to the brain, switching off the stress response.



STRESS ISN'T JUST HUMAN

BACTERIA

These microbes cope with changes to their environment by altering the way they use their genes. Molecules called sigma factors change which genes are switched on, and which are turned off.

PLANTS

Water stress can be a real problem for plants, so they respond by conserving moisture. This includes producing rapid chemical signals that close the pores in their leaves.

FISH

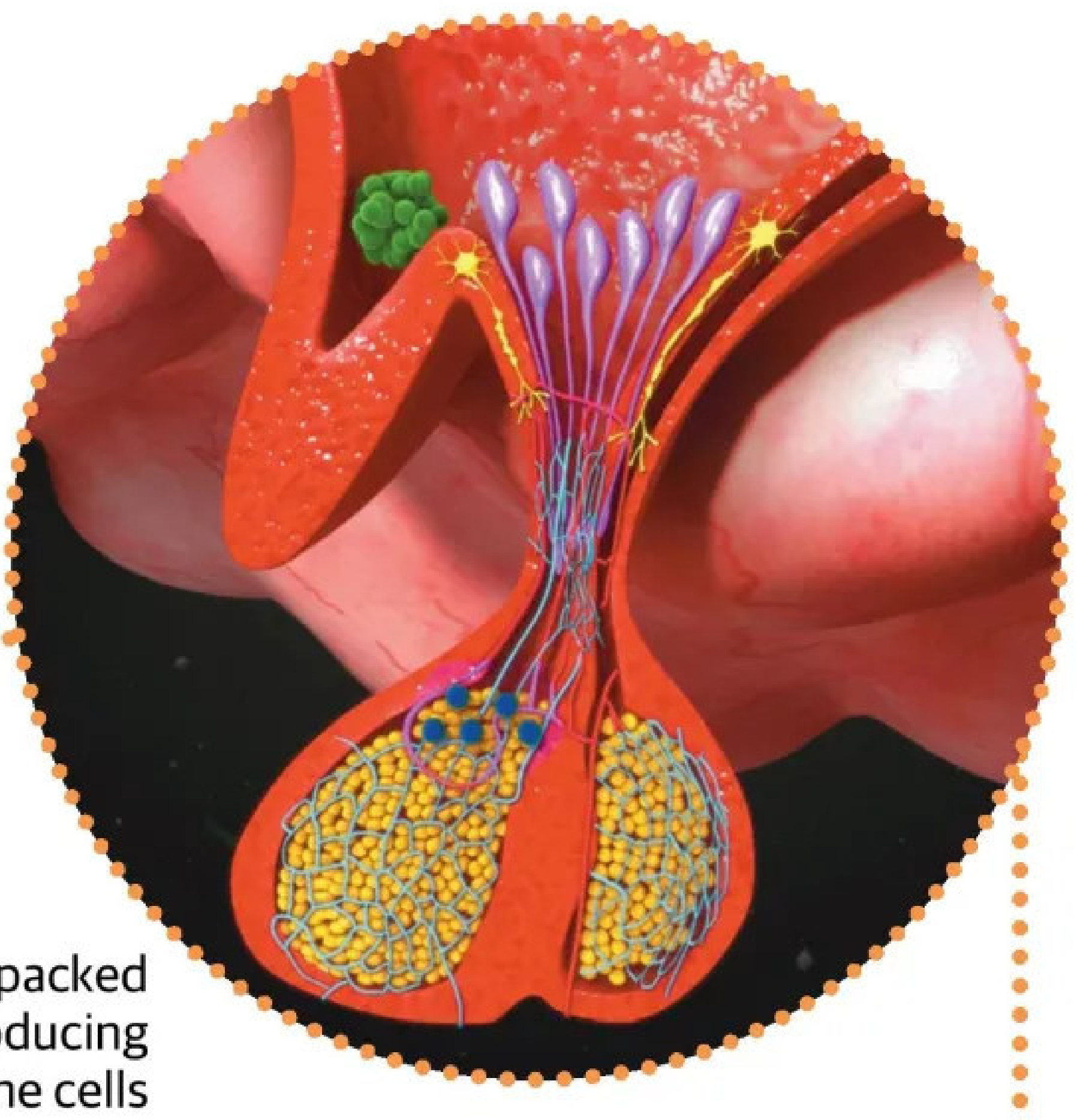
Fish have a similar stress response to other vertebrates, with a cycle of chemical signals that starts in the brain, preparing the body to release energy and shut down unnecessary activity.

BIRDS

Like us, birds make corticosteroids in response to stress. The amount goes up in birds that breed in higher places, which helps them to cope with the risks associated with nesting at high altitudes.

MICE

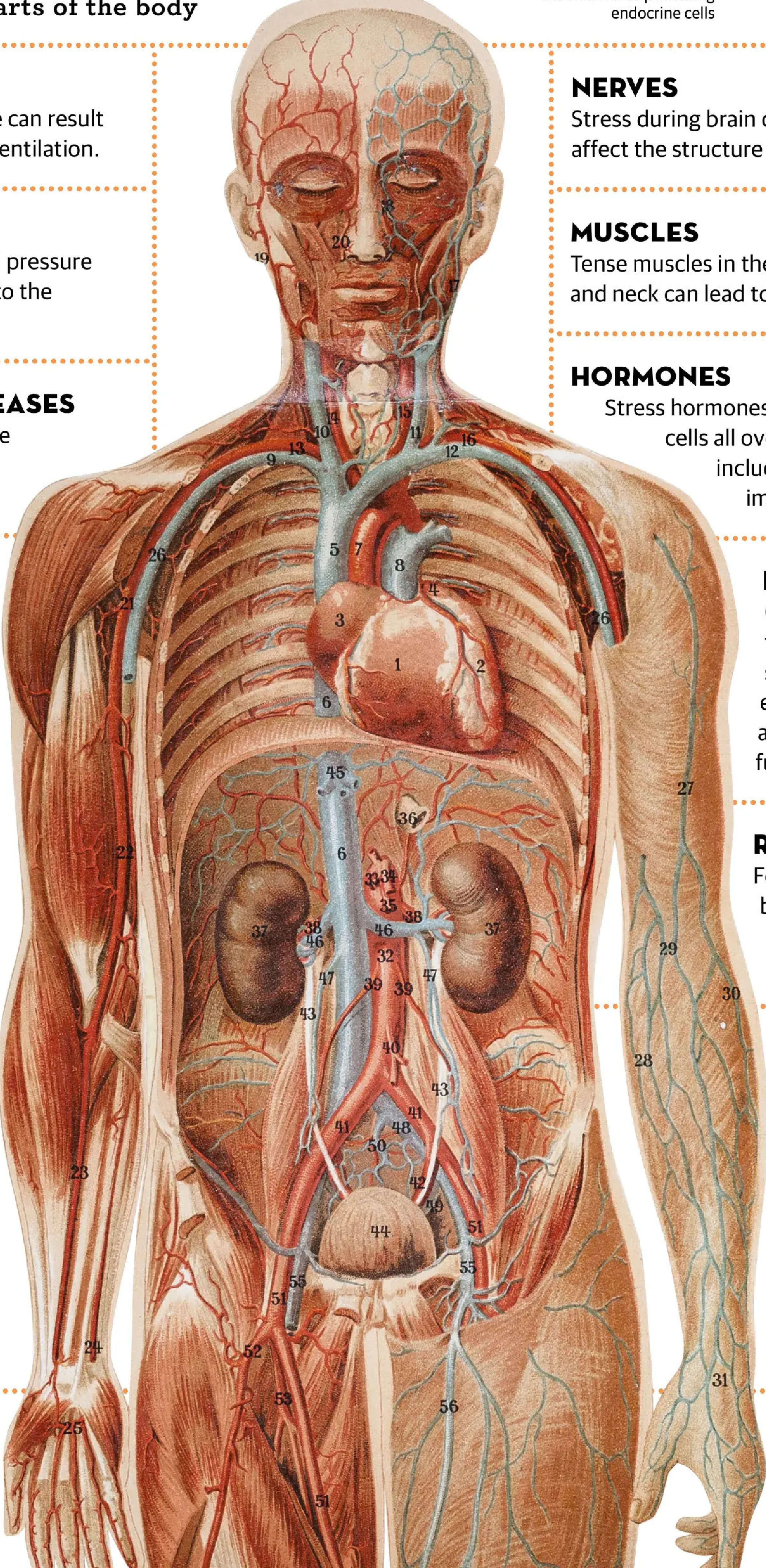
These rodents are often used as a model for human biology, but recent research showed that they are stressed by male scientists. The effect seems to be related to their smell, and it may skew the results of tests.



The pituitary gland is packed with hormone-producing endocrine cells

THE EFFECTS OF STRESS

Too much stress can have a negative effect on different parts of the body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BREATHING

An increased breathing rate can result in panic attacks and hyperventilation.

HEART RATE

Raised heart rate and blood pressure can cause gradual damage to the cardiovascular system.

RESPIRATION INCREASES

Faster breathing sends more oxygen to your muscles to prepare them for action.

> "It turns out that if we believe that stress is bad, it is more likely to do us harm"

NERVES

Stress during brain development can affect the structure of the growing brain.

MUSCLES

Tense muscles in the head, shoulders and neck can lead to headaches.

HORMONES

Stress hormones like cortisol affect cells all over the body, including dampening the immune response.

DIGESTION

Changes in blood flow to the digestive system and different eating patterns can affect bowel function.

REPRODUCTION

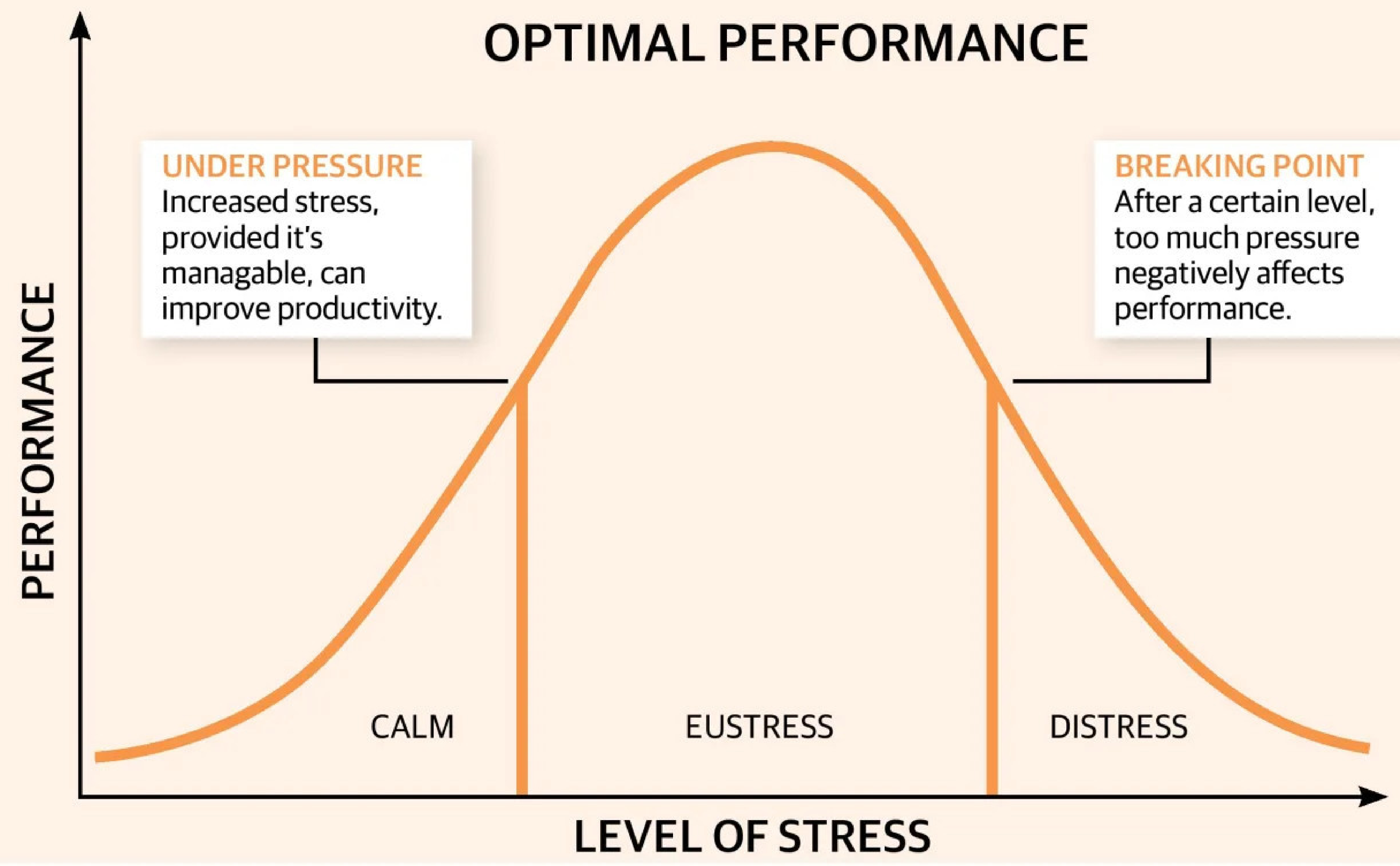
Fertility and libido can be affected by chronic stress in both men and women.

physical activity, this response helps to minimise bleeding in case of injury. Though most stresses we experience now don't carry a risk of physical harm, this would have been useful in our evolutionary past. Which response is chosen varies on circumstances, but individuals are more likely to favour one or the other, and it's thought that these patterns are set early in life.

At the same time, a slower but more persistent stress response is also activated. The hypothalamus pumps out a molecule called corticotropin-releasing factor (CRF). This is the trigger for the biological response that puts the body into survival mode. From the hypothalamus, CRF hops a short distance

EUSTRESS VS DISTRESS

How can stress levels affect our ability to work?



STRESS-RELATED DAMAGE

Long-term (otherwise known as chronic) stress can be bad for our health, but it's challenging to pin down exactly why. Is it to do with poor lifestyle choices made under pressure, or is there something happening inside the body as a result of a prolonged stress response?

In 2004, a research team from the US published a paper in the journal *PNAS* that investigated what happens to our cells under stress. They looked at the genetic code, honing in on the protective caps that cover the ends of each chromosome. Known as telomeres, these structures shorten as cells get older. An enzyme called telomerase can replenish telomeres, but stress diminishes the supply of this regenerative enzyme.

The team studied a group of 58 women, and they found that the longer the women had been stressed, and the more stressed that they felt, the more likely they were to have shortened telomeres – a sign that their bodies were feeling the strain. Exactly why this happens is not currently known.

GOOD STRESS?

In 1936, endocrinologist Hans Selye wrote a letter to the scientific journal *Nature*, describing the "general alarm reaction of the organism." He was one of the first people to identify and investigate biological stress. He continued his investigations, and after nearly 40 years of research, Selye came to the conclusion that stress wasn't actually all that bad.

People had known for a long time that there's a link between 'stress' and productivity. In 1908, two researchers, Yerkes and Dodson, revealed that there's a sweet-spot, where there's just enough pressure to encourage productivity, but not so much that it becomes too much for the person to handle.

Selye was interested in the idea that the feeling of stress isn't so much about what happens to the body, but about how each individual reacts to the changes. In the 1970s, he introduced two new words, 'eustress' and 'distress', to describe what he saw. Eustress was beneficial stress, and distress was bad.

through the bloodstream to the pituitary gland, where it triggers the release of a second, longer-range chemical message. Known as adrenocorticotropic hormone (ACTH), this molecule travels around the body in the bloodstream, reaching the kidneys, where it triggers the next step in the stress response process.

On top of each kidney is a hormone factory known as an adrenal gland, and within each is a compartment known as the adrenal cortex. The cells here produce glucocorticoids, the body's natural steroids. And it's these steroids that help the rest of the body to deal with stress. Cortisol interferes with insulin, helping to keep blood sugar levels up. It helps to balance the body's pH; it dampens the immune response; and it even affects the formation of memories.

Short-term stress is quickly corrected by the body, and, to prevent the cycle continuing forever, the cortisol also acts as an off switch. It feeds back to the brain, letting it know that the stress response has been fully activated, and helps to switch off the production of CRF and ACTH. But sometimes, stress can develop into a long-term, chronic problem.

Humans are unique among animals (as far as we know) in that we think abstractly about the world and ourselves. Our huge brains are a gift, but can also lead to long-term stress as we worry over problems that just wouldn't occur to other animals, like work and money.

While the stress response has been honed by evolution to boost the chances of survival during short periods of increased environmental pressure, in the long term it can cause damage. Ultimately, it can lead to illness if left unchecked.

Exposure to stress during childhood, be it war, neglect or even divorce, can make people more likely to experience mental health problems as adults. During this period, the brain is still developing, and chronic stress can cause structural changes that affect the way that it functions. As adults, chronic stress puts strain on the heart and blood vessels, contributing to cardiovascular disease, heart attacks and strokes, and it can also damage the immune system.

DEALING WITH DISTRESS

There are several coping strategies that can help to combat stress

BELIEVE IN YOUR BODY

Some studies have shown that stress is more harmful if you believe it is harmful. Trusting that your body is preparing you to cope helps to minimise damage.

EXERCISE

The fight-or-flight response prepares your body for activity, so use up that nervous energy by exercising. Exercise also releases natural endorphins that boost your mood.

TALK

People are social creatures, and the phrase 'a problem shared is a problem halved' didn't come out of thin air. Seeking support can help to reduce stress.

HELP OTHERS

Going out of your way to help other people when you are already stressed might seem counterintuitive, but it can help to give you purpose and perspective.

During an acute stress response, immune cells are mobilised in case they need to fend off infection, but the stress steroid cortisol affects their function in the long term. In fact, drugs based on cortisol are used to dampen down the immune system in patients in need of immunosuppression.

Long-term stress can be a real problem. Not only does the response itself put pressure on the body, but coping mechanisms, including drinking and smoking, can all damage our insides. However, it's not just about the physical effects. 'Stress' is a loaded word, and recent research has been looking at how our perceptions of stress affect its impact on the body. It turns out that if we believe stress is bad, it is more likely to do us harm.

Studies in the US have shown that people who are stressed have an increased risk of dying. But – and this is critical – only if they believed that stress itself could cause them harm. In fact, people who were stressed but didn't believe it was bad for them had a lower risk of dying than those who were barely stressed at all.

The negative connotations of the word 'stress' bothered Hans Selye, who had first pointed out the stress response in the 1930s. Part of the trouble is that stress isn't just used to describe the body's response to challenging situations. In physics, strain is the change in shape or size of an object as a result of an external force, and stress is the internal force associated with it. The use of the same word links the two in people's minds.

Astonishingly, changing the way you think about stress seems to be able to change the effect it has on you. Seeing sweaty palms, increased heart rate and rapid breathing as signs that your body is trying to help you alters your internal response. Heart rate still increases, but blood vessels can stay relaxed, which is much better for the cardiovascular system. What's more, there's another component to the stress response that is often overlooked: oxytocin.

Popularly known as the 'cuddle hormone', oxytocin helps mothers to bond to their babies, and it's released by the brain when we are hugged. It is also produced during stress, helping us to seek social support. Oxytocin also helps by dilating blood vessels, lowering blood pressure and even helps to repair the heart.

While stress can feel unpleasant, it is there to help us deal with life's challenges. Believing in your body, and seeking support when things become too much, can help keep it under control.

MONITORING STRESS

There are several electronic gadgets that claim to be able to track your stress levels by tapping in to your heart rate, breathing, skin conductance and blood oxygen. The idea is to help you to identify, and avoid, your stress triggers.

However, although some of the science behind the measurements they take is sound, it's not always easy to decipher what they mean. For example, the time between heartbeats varies less when you are stressed, but also when you are excited. A device that picks up on these changes won't be able to tell you which mood you are in unless it knows what else is happening around you.

TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF

Some people seek comfort in damaging activities during times of stress, but nicotine, alcohol, food and other addictive substances don't help the underlying problem.

MAKE A PLAN

Sometimes there are things you can't change, but identifying the areas that you can and making a realistic plan to tackle them can help to guide you through stressful times.

TRY MINDFULNESS

Stopping and focusing on the present moment through meditation or mindfulness can help to change the way that you think and feel, reducing the impact of stress.

KEEP A STRESS DIARY

Noting down the things that trigger feelings of stress can help you to prepare for them in the future – why not give this a try?

Images; Getty Images

5 STRANGE FACTS ABOUT MEMORY

Memory can be a playful thing. It collects minute details from childhood events, yet leaves us wondering where we left our keys, reveals Bahar Gholipour

1 DOORWAYS DESTROY MEMORY

Do you ever find yourself in a room, without remembering why you ended up there? Researchers say the doorway may be to blame. The very act of walking through a door may hint to the brain that a new scene has started and it should store prior memories away, causing strange memory lapses. "Entering or exiting through a doorway serves as an 'event boundary' in the mind, separating episodes of activity and filing them away," explains Gabriel Radvansky, a psychologist at the University of Notre Dame. "Recalling the decision or activity that was made in a different room is difficult because it has been compartmentalized." Event-boundaries are useful, because they help us to organise our mental timelines and remember not just where, but when events occurred.

> "It's possible to lose memories before they even have a chance to become stored, due to injuries in the brain's structures"

2 MIND-ERASING ACTIVITIES

Although rare, certain activities can result in a temporary memory loss and brain fog, called transient global amnesia. For example, sex has been reported to cause this memory problem, with patients forgetting the past day or so, and having difficulty forming new memories. People with transient global amnesia suffer no serious side effects, and the memory problems usually disappear in a few hours. But it's not clear how this happens, and brain scans of patients who have had this type of amnesia show no signs of damage to the brain, or signs of stroke.

3 MEMORIES CAN LIVE ON, EVEN IF WE CAN'T ACCESS THEM

Could forgotten songs continue to live on inside our heads, without us knowing? In a 2013 report of a strange case in the journal *Frontiers in Neurology*, researchers described a woman who had musical hallucinations of a song that she didn't recognise, but others did. "To our knowledge, this is the first report of musical hallucinations of non-recognizable songs that were recognized by others in the patient's environment," the researchers wrote. The scientists said the woman had likely known the song at some point, but forgot it. The case raises the question of what happens to forgotten memories, they said, and suggests that memories can be stored in some form in the brain that renders them accessible, and yet unrecognisable.

4 WE MAY BE PROGRAMMED TO FORGET INFANCY

Our earliest childhood memories fade, and there's likely a reason for that. Usually people don't recall any memories from their earliest years of life before the age of three or four. This is called infantile amnesia. Scientists previously thought that early memories were there, but children just didn't have the language skills to verbalise them. However, recent research shows that children do make memories during their early years, but forget them through deliberate mechanisms. One explanation for this is that the developing brain, while generating cells, wipes out stored memories.

5 BRAIN INJURIES MAY CAUSE FORGETFULNESS

It's possible to lose memories before they even have a chance to become stored, due to injuries in the brain's structures that are specifically involved in handling memory formation, maintenance and recall. Damage to these areas can result in curious forms of amnesia. In one of the most-studied cases, Patient HM lost the ability to form any new memories after his hippocampus was removed during a surgery to treat his epilepsy. Another famous case records the story of Patient EP, who had a similar fate after he had inflammation of the brain caused by a virus.

Images: All Getty Images

HEALTHY MIND, HEALTHY BODY

Becoming physically healthier and fitter often starts by mastering your mindset and focusing on your mental fitness tells Alison Morgan

We all know we can't go to the gym once and then expect that to be enough to cause a huge change to our physique or reach the result we're aiming for. You repeat something, making small changes that are sometimes hard to see on a day-by-day basis, but over a longer period all add up and make a big difference to your body.

Think of mastering your mindset in the same way, like exercising a muscle over and over to strengthen it. Aim to practise and develop mental fitness over time using the techniques on the following pages. Give it equal attention to your physical training, exercise and movement and you'll become a mentally and physically fitter person.

Turning to neuroscience, you'll learn what's happening in your brain with all these areas:

- **Loving every inch of yourself**
- Comfort zone and change
- **Listening to your self-talk and beliefs**
- Heartstyles – understanding why you're doing the things you do and how you can be more effective at life
- **Habits**

Self-awareness

Delving into your inner thoughts, inner self and workings can be an emotional and sometimes uncomfortable journey. You may unearth things you didn't know, can't remember or were burying deep down to protect yourself. So take your time. Be kind to yourself. Remember this is an ongoing journey – it's about learning more about yourself and taking an 'inside out' approach to living, rather than doing things because of external influences around you. Start to listen to any negative thoughts or feelings as opposed

"Mindfully listen out and know what you're thinking and feeling"

to ignoring or dismissing them. Instead, notice them, teach yourself to be curious about them, and remind yourself that thoughts are purely mental events and, as such, you are in complete control if you want to change them. Being aware of this and acting on it can gradually lead to becoming a better version of yourself, and give you some of the tools needed to attain inner happiness.

Think of nurturing the ongoing practice of mindfulness like learning to drive. Practice and repetition lead to developing a stronger skill of mindfulness, but you will also find lots of ideas on the following pages to help develop the state of being mindful in the moment.

Loving yourself

Having a negative body-image or self-image can often lead to a place of self-loathing and self-doubt, and to experiencing a lack of self-belief and confidence. In this space, life can feel more like an uphill battle, a bit harder and not as enjoyable. It might stop you from doing and achieving all the things you really are capable of; make you feel inadequate; or cause you to seek approval and validation from others to feel better about yourself.

But we all deserve to feel good and like – or even love – ourselves, right? We only get one human body to live in and it has to carry us through our whole lives, so maybe it's better to look after it. We also only get one stab at this journey of life, so the choice is yours in terms of how to live it. Loving yourself might not be easy, but wonderful things will happen if you give it a go!

It begins with a mindful awareness of your personal body story – what thoughts and feelings do you have about yourself? We all have high and low days, but what are your recurring thoughts about yourself? Listen to them and capture them, both the positive and negative ones.

You might find they're primarily negative like: 'I'm fat and ugly and I've failed to stick to the diet again'. Or you

WHAT EXACTLY IS SELF-LOVE?

It's not just about loving your bum (or any other body part), although that's a great place to start! Genuine self-love can go a bit deeper by focusing on these key factors:

Accept yourself for who you are, right here, right now

Feel totally comfortable in your own skin

Feel proud of who you are. Believe in yourself

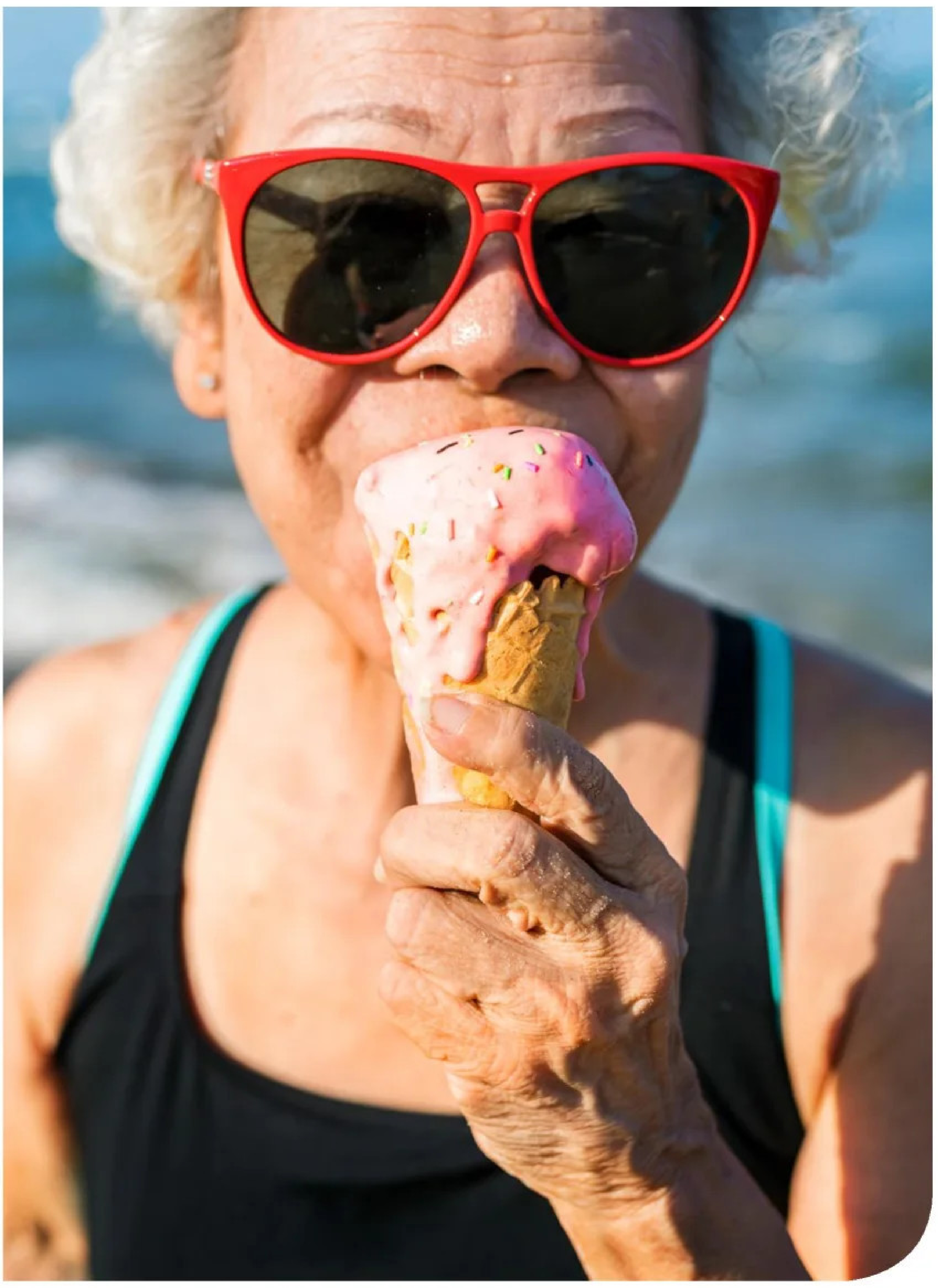
Keep promises to yourself

Trust and have confidence in yourself

Help and support others; don't compare or compete

Look after yourself and do the things you need to do to feel safe and secure. Not just in terms of your health, but in all areas of life, such as your finances

Love and accept your flaws



could find positive ones such as: 'My legs are feeling strong and looking good in these shorts'. Whatever the thoughts are, the most important step is to develop the skill to mindfully listen out and know what you're thinking and feeling. Also remember that they are personal to you and so different for everyone.

Once you start to focus on and listen to your thoughts, think about this: would you say those things to your best friend? Maybe some of the positive things, yes, but would you say any of the negative stuff? Probably not, so why are you talking to yourself in that way? Start to treat yourself as you would your best friend; in a compassionate, kind way. You are the only person you're going to spend the rest of your life with, so it's surely better to spend it in nice company?

It's a journey that you take from accepting yourself, to liking yourself, to loving every inch of yourself. Your thoughts and feelings may ebb and flow over time depending on different situations. If you can learn the skill of mindfully paying attention to your thoughts and accepting yourself for where you are right now and being comfortable in your own skin, you will build the mental strength and resilience to help you through life and find a place of inner peace with yourself, regardless of what's happening on the outside.

Where to start

You may already be in a really secure place with yourself, practising self-love every day and feeling the benefits, which is great. If you feel you want to work more on this area and make some changes, here are some tips on where to start:

- **Recognise how you feel about yourself right now. What's that inner voice saying – are you beating yourself up over nothing or saying nice things?**
- Apologise to yourself and your body for the way you've been treating it, if you've been somewhat negative. Forgive yourself and make the decision to move forward. Being critical of yourself isn't helping anyone, least of all you.
- **Make a commitment to yourself that you're going to work on loving yourself. You're in the driving seat and only you can do this, so commit to it with all of your heart.**
- Dig deeper and understand exactly what you're saying about yourself – what's your story? Is it that every time you look in the mirror you criticise a certain part of your body, or do you have a continuing story that you'll never be able to run a marathon because you were never good at running at school? When does the positive stuff crop up and why? By understanding this, you can start to rewrite your story.
- **Decide what parts of your story to keep, let go of and change. Instead of thinking, 'I can never stick to a diet, I always give up after a couple of weeks', simply change your thoughts to, 'I am sticking to my fitness and diet plan, I'm feeling the difference and making progress'. Even if you don't fully believe these thoughts, you are creating new thinking patterns in your brain by simply repeating them, just like training a muscle over and over again.**
- What things make you feel good? If eating healthy food, a sweaty spinning session or a massage make you feel good, do more of it.
- **Start now. Even if you don't feel like it, just start. Change will happen. It won't be overnight but build up to it and do it in your own time.**
- Repeat your new thoughts and story as often as you can – it might simply be 'I love myself, I love myself I love myself'. Write it down and keep it somewhere you can read frequently.
- **Be more mindful of any negative thoughts cropping up. If they do, observe them and focus on how it's making you feel in your body rather than fighting against them.**
- Forget 'perfect', there's no such thing! Instead, focus on becoming a better, healthier, stronger version of you and be proud of your unique self!
- **Be grateful for what you have – the human body is amazing. What are the wonderful things that your body has done? Where have your feet carried you to or what physical feats have you achieved? Be grateful and proud of those.**

"Find a place of inner peace with yourself, regardless of what's happening on the outside"

YOUR COMFORT ZONE

Change is scary

Setting a new goal feels exciting. You've decided to take on the challenge of running your first race, take up a new exercise class or tackle your weight loss once and for all. However, the excitement can soon turn to fear or a feeling of being overwhelmed as we start to think about the huge task in front of us, maybe not knowing where to start. This can put us into 'freeze mode', where no action happens at all. Stepping into the seemingly unknown – doing something a little bit different, something you may not have done before, something where you don't actually know what's going to happen – can be an exciting prospect, but it's also a scary one.

Great things happen when you leave your comfort zonery

Staying in our comfort zone is a warm and cosy place to be. It's what we know, what we're used to and where we feel safe. Some people want to stay here and that's okay, but if you're looking to make a change and transform yourself, no matter how big or small, you have to step out of your comfort zone. Learning to overcome any fear of change is an amazing place to live our lives from.

Why change can feel difficult

We're wired to stay in our comfort zones. Changing and doing something different, whether it's going to the gym for the first time or trying a new exercise or diet, can feel uncomfortable. Your brain resists change because it's easier to stay on autopilot and do the things you normally do, which take up less energy and also lessen pain or discomfort. It's harder work for our brains to try something new. It takes more energy, conscious thinking and work, so your brain resists. It likes to conserve energy. Our brains also seek pleasure and avoid pain. So it could be a lot more pleasurable to sit on our sofas at night watching TV than going for that run, which may potentially cause us some pain, even though we logically know it's going to benefit our health. When we talk about pain, we mean some discomfort that might be physical and emotional. So trying to figure out what pain or discomfort you might be avoiding is a great first step.

Remember when you learned something new? Maybe it was riding a bike or driving a car. The process of learning feels weird and uncomfortable and takes time to practise, and often there is a temptation to give up. However, the more you persist, practise, repeat and learn, the easier it becomes over time. By applying this same thinking and logic to the aspects you're changing with your fitness and becoming comfortable living outside your comfort zone, will help you make the changes that you want. don't actually know what's going to happen – can be exciting but also scary.

CHANGING YOUR WAYS

Start to make changes

1 Make a vision board capturing your goal using images of what it looks like. Look at it every morning and imagine what it feels like to be positively working on and achieving your goal.

2 Break down your goal into small actions and tasks that you can work on every day. Seeing the small steps will help reduce any fear of the goal being too big to achieve.

3 Celebrate your wins, no matter how big or small, and be proud of them! Think about your achievements at the end of every day – you went for that walk, cycled, ate nutritious foods.

4 Whatever it is, think and feel the satisfaction and pride every day. This will release chemicals in your brain that will spur you on and keep you motivated.

5 Accept that your health and fitness journey is going to be full of ups and downs. We're all human, nobody is perfect, so don't give up if you stumble.

6 There is no failure. If something hasn't gone to plan, don't beat yourself up. Focus on learning from it – why did it happen, what triggered it, and how can you stop it happening next time?

7 See the bigger picture with your progress. Getting on the scales or looking in the mirror every day searching for changes is probably going to leave you feeling disheartened and down, as changes will be small. You can't see a flower suddenly blooming, but it does happen. Change takes time – so be patient and kind to yourself through the process!

Get out of that comfort zone

1 Become more mindful of how you're feeling. Seek awareness in what that uncomfortable feeling feels like when you're trying something different or new. How does it show up in your body? Butterflies, sick feeling in the stomach, something stuck in your throat, heart beating faster…

2 Be okay with these feelings. Don't fight them, just recognise and be aware of them. If you battle against them or try to ignore them, it might make things worse. Sit with the feeling, pay attention to it, be curious of it, close your eyes and focus on it for a few minutes.

3 Go one step further – become comfortable and used to these feelings. In fact, celebrate them and make them your best friends because they mean you're changing, growing and transforming, which is a great place to be!

4 Thank your brain for trying to protect you and keep you in your comfort zone, but say 'I'm going to see what it's like in this new space out of my comfort zone where I haven't ventured before'.

5 Just do one little thing: take a tiny step. Get started, and you'll soon gain momentum.

Self-talk and beliefs

Your thoughts drive your feelings, actions and behaviours every day, often without you knowing it. The importance of developing the mindful skill of becoming aware of these should not be underestimated, whether the thoughts are positive or negative. Developing the skill to do this is the key starting point.

Cycle of thoughts

Have you ever woken up and realised with a sinking feeling that the day ahead is filled with chores and things you don't want to do? If you wake up feeling negative, it can cause your mind to think negatively about other things you're doing that day, like what to eat or whether to exercise. In fact, you may make different choices than if you were feeling more positive. This spiral of thoughts can become an unconscious cycle and, before we know it, we're having a really bad day, possibly even feeling anxious or depressed. You might not really understand where it's all come from as you were fine yesterday. So it's this cycle of thoughts that's driving that bad mood and negative thinking, not the actual things that are happening to you throughout your day. The good news? You're in absolute control to change it!

> "If you're in a negative mood, that mood may then continue to the next situation"

Fact or fiction?

Even when we're not consciously thinking much, our mind is actually busy making associations and links that are useful to us, such as songs or smells that trigger memories and feelings of moments in your past.

Our minds also create stories in our heads that go beyond the evidence or facts that we are experiencing. These stories can spiral out of control and cause moods, good or bad. Maybe you've just eaten a cake. The facts and evidence are that you've just consumed a mixture of butter, sugar, eggs and flour. But our mind might start creating a story that could be saying something like: 'I'm so terrible. I've just blown my diet. I've got no self-control and I feel fat already'. Or it could be more positive and create a story around: 'I really needed an injection of energy, that was delicious'.

Irrelevant of the story, which is personal to the individual, these stories that go beyond the facts of the situation often happen automatically and can cause problems. If you're in a negative mood, that mood may then continue to the next situation you face and affect the things you do. Maybe you make the decision to skip the gym, and get a takeaway and bottle of wine for dinner. Before you know it, you've fallen off your fitness plan without quite knowing why.

So by being able to notice these stories, notice the evidence and put some space between your thoughts and actions, you can start to take back control and make decisions about what you're doing rather than continue your day on autopilot. Once you start noticing this and become aware of the things that trigger these thoughts, you can devise your own ways to combat them, whether it's taking a walk, calling your best friend to chat it through, or meditating – there will be something that works for you.

What's your story really saying?

Your personal fitness goal, your conscious self-talk, and the words coming out of your mouth might be saying, for example, that you want to lose weight.

For many people, this 'outside story' is different to their subconscious story. The subconscious story is often pulling in the opposite direction, and actually drives more behaviour than the outside story.

We know that our brains avoid pain and discomfort, so if you have a deep-rooted belief, such as thinking you don't have what it takes to lose weight, your brain will avoid this pain of potential failure.

It's important to dig deep and figure out what your beliefs and stories actually are, and then work to align your outside story to your internal beliefs, ensuring they can move together in the same direction to help achieve your goals. To help with this, think about the following questions:

- **What is the greater pain if you don't do it?**
- What is the greater pleasure if you do it?
- **Look at everything you do as a choice. Realise and become aware that everything you do is a choice. Adjust your decisions so they're in your best interest, and perform actions that will move you closer to your goals.**

Take action

- **Keep a journal of your stories and inner dialogue.**
- Ask yourself why you think you've got this negative voice at the moment. Where is it coming from? Close your eyes, listen to how you feel when you hear the thoughts.
- **Reframe and rewrite that story. If it's saying, 'I can't lose weight', you will always fail. Switch it to something that works for you, such as, 'I am doing this. I can and am losing weight'. Repeat it as many times as possible.**
- Focus on your achievements, not the setbacks. Think of and write down three things at the end of every day that you've achieved.
- **Often the negative talk is trying to keep you safe from hurt and in your comfort zone. So when the negative voice pops up, thank your brain for keeping you safe, but say you're going to try anyway. Maybe it'll be good, maybe it won't, but be open and willing to find out.**
- The practice of mindfulness will have you observe this chatter, so add a meditation to your morning and evening routine.

Be the best version of you

We understand that our thoughts are driving the things we do. We think we're making conscious choices every day, but most of our actions are driven at a subconscious level. Being more present and aware, and pausing for a moment to understand what's really driving your actions, behaviours, thoughts and feelings, can help you to take control and start making healthy steps to becoming a better version of you. Understanding how to do this and take an 'inside out' approach to life rather than be influenced by the things around you, may create sustainable change and build your inner confidence to live life to the full. Heartstyles is a tool used for personal development and growth that will give you a structure to identify where to start and what to do to help you on that journey of change.

A simple formula

To help understand what's driving your behaviour and actions, use this simple formula:

situation + thinking = behaviour

The situation you're in and your thoughts drive you to behave and act in the way

you do, whether you're consciously aware of it in the moment or not. Often, we cannot control the situation we're faced with – we can't control other people and what they say, for example. But we can be aware of and control our thoughts and thinking, and once we realise this and take command of it, it can have a dramatic effect on the things we're doing. You can make a conscious choice about the most effective way to act and behave that's going to contribute to you and your fitness goals, rather than just react to situations on autopilot.

Be aware of your thoughts

Our thoughts drive our feelings and behaviours. We can focus on three key areas that make up our thinking:

Triggers / Truths / Templates

Triggers

Part of our brain is constantly scanning the world around us for any threats, both physical and emotional. It's protecting us and can trigger fight, flight or freeze behaviour. Think of it as a radar that's getting triggered by things we're encountering every day. These triggers could be a time of day, a place, a smell, a taste, a person… the list is endless, but they're things that will cause you to behave in a certain way. For example, entering a gym for the first time might trigger you to feel anxious, have butterflies in your stomach and not make eye contact with anyone; walking past a specific coffee shop might trigger you to go in and buy your regular coffee and cake, which happens on autopilot.

Truths

Our truths can be thought of as a set of beliefs that we've created over time about ourselves and others. When we're born, we have no beliefs. It's through experiencing life that we develop our belief system – beliefs that help us, but may also hold us back. What beliefs do you have about yourself and your health and fitness? It might be you weren't a great runner at school so have a belief that you'll never be able to run ten kilometres. It could be you have a belief that having a healthy diet keeps you full of energy to enable yourself to do everything you want to do in life. Start to question whether your beliefs are the actual truth. Having a belief that you can't run ten kilometres isn't probably true. If you put a bit of focus, effort and learning on how to build up to running that distance, the chances are you'll be able to!

Templates

A template is an experience that's happened to us (both positive and negative), and if it was significant enough at the time, it will be stored like a file in an area of your brain called the limbic system. Think of it like a filing cabinet of memories. When you enter into a situation, your limbic system tries to work out whether the situation is familiar and whether you've experienced it before so you can work out what to do and how to act. However, as clever as our brain is, this can cause problems, because we misinterpret the environment around us, so even if it's not a perfect match to a previous situation, our brain says 'that's good enough', and can sometimes fill in details that haven't actually happened.

Negative templates can hold us back from living to our potential. We might have experienced nasty comments about our body or weight in the past that have stuck in that filing cabinet in our brain, which might mean you avoid exercise through fear of receiving hurtful remarks again. Being aware of how your brain functions in this way will enable you to start understanding more about your behaviour, so you can begin to make different choices about the things that you're doing.

> "Take control and start making healthy steps to becoming a better version of you"

Time for action

Work through these steps to put together an action plan in order to help you change, to become more effective, and to be the best, healthiest and fittest version of you possible!

- **Identify the behaviour that you want to change.**
- What situations do you get in that cause that behaviour?
- **What triggers you to behave in that way?**
- What can you do to change?

EXAMPLE:

Behaviour

I'm always comparing myself to other people's bodies in the gym and in the mainstream media, and I always feel inadequate. This makes me want to give up, so I often avoid exercise and criticise myself in the mirror.

Situation

I feel like this when I'm in the gym and looking though magazines.

Trigger

Being next to someone in the gym who's got a better body than mine. This happens especially if my confidence is low.

“Put together an action plan to help you change”

Action

I will stay more focused on me and what I’m doing. I will learn the right exercises and follow the right nutrition plan, which will build my confidence. I will remember that the people I’m comparing myself to may also feel inadequate. I’m going to work on my self-talk by telling myself every morning that I am good enough and can do this. I will celebrate my small achievements and feel proud of what it is I’m doing.

Heartstyles is a programme for individuals and organisations to live a more effective life from the heart. By learning more about the deep-rooted things that might be driving your behaviours, you can transform yourself to become your best self. Email **alison.morgan@heartstylesconsulting.com** to learn more about a personal programme, or visit **www.heartstyles.com**.

IS YOUR BEHAVIOUR AS EFFECTIVE AS IT CAN BE?

We move in and out of being effective and ineffective all day long. The more we become aware of what we're doing, the more we can spend time doing effective things that help us move towards our fitness goals quicker and in healthier ways.

Effective behaviours

Effective behaviours come from a place of courage, humility and personal growth, or a place of love and respect. These are extraordinary places to live your life from and the aim is to be here as much as possible. See the Humility and Love boxes on the next page.

Ineffective behaviours

Operating from an ineffective place isn't bad, and in fact it's quite a normal place to operate from, but it's simply not serving you to live in your potential. Ineffective behaviour can be doing things because of fear and a need to protect yourself, or from a place of ego or negative pride where you're doing things to promote yourself. See the Pride and Fear boxes on the next page.

So how does this relate to your fitness journey and what might some of your behaviours look like in each of the quadrants? Take a look at the examples on the following page to help bring each quadrant to life. Be honest with yourself and think about what behaviours you might be doing that are ineffective and effective, and which box they might fit into.

EFFECTIVE

HUMILITY

The blue quadrant is all about making things happen and learning, so you can achieve your goals with a spirit of humility and openness. Humility gives space for your heart, mind and character to grow. It's showing the spirit of courage and personal growth. For example:

- **You are clear on your goals and working towards achieving them.**
- You are focused on learning and becoming knowledgeable about what you need to do to become fitter and healthier.
- **You show courage in trying new things and pushing yourself outside of your comfort zone.**
- You are reliable, consistent and committed to yourself to take the right actions.

LOVE

The red quadrant of love can be described as passion, caring, loyalty, respect and honour. There are different types of love. People love sport and food in a different way to how they love their partner or children. Love is supporting those around you, helping them learn and being compassionate. For example:

- **You support and encourage others around you in getting healthier and fitter.**
- As well as learning yourself, you share your knowledge and the things that you're learning with others.
- **You don't judge others, but show compassion to them and seek to understand what's going on in their world.**
- You have a 'we're all in it together' mentality, and feel comfortable with showing people the real you.

PRIDE

The green quadrant of negative pride can also be called ego. The prison of pride attaches itself to having to prove yourself, be overly competitive and strive for perfection. It leaves no space for growth, and blocks reaching your potential. This is where your behaviour becomes all about 'me, me, me' and promoting yourself. For example:

- **You compare yourself to others and compete against them at all costs, trying to get one up on them, rather than focus on yourself.**
- You plan and control everything you do down to the finest detail, and then stress when something changes.
- **You are striving for perfection, and constantly beat yourself up for not doing enough.**
- You focus on what you haven't done rather than the achievements you've made.

FEAR

The orange quadrant of fear is deeply rooted in our humanity. The fear of others' criticism, being wrong and failure are all examples of how fear can hold us back. Fear can overwhelm and you become trapped by it. You are protecting yourself, which leads to hiding and passive behaviour. For example:

- **You're afraid of failing or looking stupid so you avoid taking action and put things off.**
- You can be overly sensitive to remarks about you and what you're doing, and take things very personally.
- **You seek out nice comments and approval from others, maybe posting photos on social media for the 'likes' and to get validation.**
- You're constantly focused on what others think and do, rather than the right thing to help you achieve your goals.

INEFFECTIVE

Habits

Habits shape our lives and control a lot of our actions and behaviours, whether we are aware of this or not. Most of the choices we make each day feel like well-considered decisions, such as what to have for breakfast, taking your dog for a walk each evening, or collapsing on the sofa with a glass of wine to unwind after a long day at work. In actual fact, a lot of these things are habits; think of them as automatic behaviours.

At one point in your life, you deliberately chose to do something, like create your morning routine. Maybe you got a new job, so decided what time to get up, shower, eat breakfast, dress, brush your teeth and so on. The more you repeated the same things in a similar pattern over and over again, day in day out, the less you made conscious choices about the actions you were performing, and so the behaviours started to become automatic.

We develop habits because our brains are constantly looking for ways to save effort and energy. The brain will try to turn almost any routine into a habit. Remember how much effort, focus and energy it takes to learn how to do something new like drive or play a musical instrument? Habits develop to quieten our decision-making centres, so not even memory is needed to repeat a pattern of actions. If you don't need to think about something at all, it takes far less energy, and without habits, our brains would shut down from being totally overwhelmed!

> "Think of them as automatic behaviours"

The bad news

Although we might understand that habits are driving a lot of what we're doing, our brains can't tell the difference between a good or a bad one. Once a habit is created, it's also hard to change. That's why it can feel difficult to transition from sitting on the sofa every night to going running instead, and those old patterns will always remain wired into the structures of our brains. Habits never really disappear, which is great when it comes to things like driving – we don't have to re-learn how to drive every time we get in a car – but it can be a hindrance when you want to break bad habits.

The good news

It is possible to create new neurological patterns in your brain – new routines that overpower the not-so-good behaviours. It just takes a bit of awareness, decision and repetition, but can be designed purposefully to help us.

The anatomy of a habit

When we think about a habit, we often focus on the behaviour or the routine – actions like going to the gym every morning or reaching for a few biscuits with an afternoon cuppa. But there are a few more steps going on with your habit that you need to understand in order to change it:

STEP 1

Trigger – a cue will trigger your brain to go into automatic mode and tell it what habit to use. This can be anything from a time of day, a place, an emotion, company of certain people, a visual trigger and so on.

STEP 2

Routine – the actual behaviour that happens. This can be physical but also emotional, for example eating a cake.

STEP 3

Reward – this can be physical sensations or emotional payoffs; something that helps you work out whether this pattern is worth remembering. It could be a sugar rush from a chocolate bar or feelings of pride you might get from being praised.

STEP 4

Craving – as a habit is developed over time, your brain starts to anticipate the reward. As soon as you experience the trigger, you start expecting and craving the reward, which is where habits are really powerful in driving you to do things without you realising it.

Change and develop new habits

Although habits can't be erased, by being aware of any behaviours that aren't helping you get fitter, and recognising what triggers those actions, you can consciously create a new pathway in your brain. Make the effort to repeat that behaviour over and over, and it will slowly become more permanent than the old behaviour. Trying to change lots of habits at once can be challenging and overwhelming. It's therefore best to start by picking one unwanted habit you have. What habit is destructive to your health and fitness? Then follow this step-by-step process to change it – you're going to keep the trigger and reward but change the behaviour.

Identify the habit to change

For example, consuming too much sugar in your diet, especially chocolate in the evenings.

Make a positive commitment to that change

For example, 'I'll eliminate sugar from my diet'; not just 'I'll give up for three months'.

Identify the trigger

Is it a particular time of day when you reach for a sugar hit, perhaps the mid-afternoon slump or after dinner? The trigger could be the smell of doughnuts as you walk past your favourite doughnut shop. Figure out exactly what is triggering you.

Identify the reward

What do you get from consuming the sugar? Does it give you a sugar rush or energy?

Change the behaviour

If the behaviour is eating chocolate after dinner, think about what you can do differently. It could be anything from going for a walk, drinking a glass or water, or calling your best friend.

Keep the reward

Choose an alternative behaviour that will give you a similar reward – often an emotional one.

Repeat, repeat, repeat

> "Your brain will go through resistance and try to pull you back to old ways"

Habit rules

- **Focus on the following points when trying to break a habit, and you'll start to notice changes in your life.**
- Change just one habit at any time. Review your progress every 30 days, and then choose another destructive habit to rewire.
- **Your brain will go through resistance and try to pull you back to old ways. Be aware of what this looks and feels like, and just keep going.**
- Repeat. Do it for long enough for the new habit to take over. This needs to be at least 100 days.
- **Identify the real hidden reason you maintain that habit – maybe there's an emotional reason you're consuming too much chocolate, so dig deep and figure out why you're doing it.**
- The effort to change will feel huge, but it will get easier.
- **For a habit to stay changed, you must believe change is possible. Enlist the support of a friend to help you.**
- Changing the habit is more important than the intensity. Show up. Do something. Develop the habit.
- **Habits tend to work on a 'last in, first out' principle. If you're developing a new habit, it's often the easiest one to break, for example a New Year's resolution. Stay focused, be compassionate to yourself through the process, and don't give up.**
- Change will happen if you believe that it's possible.

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GRATITUDE AND WELLBEING

Julie Bassett explores how the simple act of focusing on the positives in life can have a huge impact on your wellbeing

Life has a habit of getting us down. There's no need to feel bad – it happens to us all. The everyday routine can become mundane, and we can feel so busy that time seems to fly by without anything seeming to happen. It can be hard to look at the positives in your life, but there are real benefits, both physical and mental, if you take the time to harness the power of gratitude.

Recognising things and people in your life that you're grateful for can have a huge impact on your wellbeing. "Being grateful for people, things and situations in our lives can create a balanced view in our mindset and lead us to experience the abundance in our lives, rather than feeling closed, deprived and constantly striving to better our lives," explains clinical psychologist Dr Sarah Maynard (**www.wildandpreciousminds.com**). "Learning to feel grateful shows us what there is to appreciate and be thankful for in our lives right now, and can create a sense of contentment and fulfilment, without actually changing anything. This in turn can be something that lowers our stress levels and affects us physically."

This feeling of gratefulness can impact different areas in your life. For example, instead of constantly focusing on what you don't like about your body, remind yourself what it can do from a non-aesthetic perspective. You might be grateful to it for enabling you to walk along the beach, bend down to pick up a child, or take part in an exercise class. By turning your attention to these positives, you are far more likely to feel motivated to look after your body.

Barriers to gratitude

It can be difficult to show gratitude in our lives if it's new to us. It's not uncommon to be stuck in a negative mindset, seeing the downside and struggling to embrace the good. So, how can we introduce gratitude into our daily lives? Dr Maynard says: "The best way to develop a gratitude habit is to practise little and often. This helps build the neural pathways in our brain so the habit becomes more automatic. A great exercise is the 'ten-finger gratitude practice' (finding something we are grateful for, for each finger), which stretches our thinking so we realise how much there is around us to be grateful for, both the big and the small stuff."

Give it a try and see if you can isolate those first ten things that you're grateful for in your life right now. If you find it difficult, you're not alone. Dr Maynard explains that there is a psychological reason why this happens: "The brain is typically able to hold on to negative thoughts (so-called 'velcro thoughts') because it determines that these may be important to our survival, whereas positive thoughts (including areas like gratitude) are so-called 'teflon thoughts' because they more easily slip right out of our minds and off our radar unless they are consciously practised."

There are barriers to overcome to embrace a life of gratitude. Dr Maynard says that when we're in a negative mindset, "it's easy to convince ourselves there is nothing good in our lives worth being grateful for, or anything significant to include." This is limiting our ability to show gratitude and it takes practise to let go of this negativity: "If we buy into this thought, we stay stuck. If we get a bit of distance from this thought and recognise 'this is just a thought', we become free to look for things we are grateful for, regardless of whether such thoughts are present or not."

Start to feel grateful

If you would like to introduce gratitude into your life, Dr Maynard has some tips: "Look around you; there is always something to be grateful for. Maybe it's simply the fact we are alive. Anything or anyone that brings pleasure and wonder into your life, be it the blue sky, or your committed partner, can be something to be grateful for."

Once you start consciously seeking things you are grateful for, you suddenly start to realise how much good there is around you. It can be worth starting a gratitude diary to list the things you are grateful for each day.

There are so many benefits to being grateful. Those who practise gratitude daily might experience better sleep – one technique is to run through all of the things you are grateful for or everything that was good about your day just before you go to sleep. This puts you in a positive mindset for a good night's sleep, so you can wake up feeling refreshed and ready to face a new day. As you practise gratitude daily and start to feel the benefits, pass it on by showing your gratitude towards others. "Demonstrating and voicing gratitude towards others can take them by surprise!" says Dr Maynard. "However, it opens up the opportunity to show others how much we value them, and in turn cultivate a more reciprocal exchange of appreciation towards each other. Being grateful also creates a ripple effect; if someone has been the recipient of gratitude, they may be more likely to pass this on in their interactions with others." Whether it's through writing letters, sending flowers or a verbal expression of appreciation, it's well worth sharing your gratitude. Make today the first day you consciously show gratitude for the good things and people in your life, and see how it impacts on your wellbeing.

KEEP A GRATITUDE DIARY

1 A gratitude diary is a great way of helping you to focus on the things you are grateful for. There is no set format for you to start a diary, though there are some you can buy with handy headers and ideas to prompt your thoughts. All you really need, though, is five minutes a day with a notepad and pen.

2 You really should try and write in your gratitude diary every day, which helps to establish a good habit. Write down anything good that happens in your day. You could carry it with you and journal something as soon as it happens, or you could make it a regular part of your pre-bedtime routine.

3 There is no limit to the things you can cover. Did you have a nice walk into work? Write it down. Did you manage a task for the first time? Write it down. It can be big things and small things. A gratitude diary is only for noting down the positives, to build up a resource that you can pull out whenever you feel down so you can look back on all the good things that have happened to you.

4 If you prefer a more structured approach, you could work to a set format in your gratitude diary. You could list five things that you were grateful for today, one person you were grateful for today, and one personal skill you were grateful for today. This can really help to streamline your thoughts, if that's how you work.

5 The key thing to remember is that this is purely personal – it is what you are grateful for. What makes you happy is very individual, and your diary is a reflection of that.

Images: All Getty Images

FINDING PEACE IN GRIEF

Grief cannot ever be fully prepared for, says Olly Tew, but mindful thinking might be a useful tool to help you at its more difficult moments

Grief is the intense period of sorrow that can accompany the passing of a loved one or close friend. Even in circumstances where we aren't on speaking terms with the deceased, it is very likely that a person close to us passing away will lead to an intense feeling of sadness. While grief is something that everyone will have to deal with at some point, there is no way that anyone can truly prepare for it. This is just as true for people who know the death of a loved one is coming (in cases of terminal illnesses, for example) as it is when the death is sudden and unexpected. There is no way to completely prepare for the effect the person's passing will have on you. The reason for this is firstly every person is an individual, and each relationship you have with others is a unique relationship. Whether you've mourned a loved one before or not, when someone dies a relationship that is unique to you – and only to you – ends. The process of dealing with this is commonly known as 'grief'. Feelings of grief are no less strong when they occur during someone's retirement than if they happen during working life.

When does grief happen?

When a person's death is sudden, grief can take months or even years to hit, purely because you were not expecting it. For this reason, it's possible to mistake a lack of "proper grieving" feelings in the weeks following a loved one's death for a lack of feeling towards the loved one themselves. A great number of people experience intense guilt at this time for this reason. You may even fear that you are fundamentally a bad person if you don't experience grief in the way in which you feel you are supposed to, or even when you are supposed to. The truth is that there is no correct time to feel grief. Some people will begin to grieve before the person has passed, some won't begin until after the will has been read and any estate has been handled. If you have dealt with more than one death recently, it's easy to feel guilty about experiencing grief differently depending on who it is for. The death of a sibling will affect you in a very different way to the death of a parent, so it is likely that the grieving process will also be different. The difference in time or intensity of grief does not in any way relate to how much you loved that person when they were alive, and it's important to recognise that.

How does the grieving process work?

As we've said previously, how you will experience grief will be unique to you. Grief can be over relatively quickly, or it can take a long time to heal, potentially even requiring counselling. Sometimes grief can feel smaller if you are geographically far away from the person you've lost, and you might not feel its full intensity until you have gone to the place they lived. Sometimes the necessity to care for others, or even make the funeral arrangements mean the full impact of grief will not hit for some time. Some people find themselves actively unable to process feelings of grief because they feel there is too much to do at the moment to acknowledge them. Grief can even surprise you. If you have lost both of your parents, you may feel what can only be described as being 'orphaned', even when you're reaching the age of retirement yourself, and that may be a feeling that shocks you. The only thing that can be said about the grieving process is that it is different for everyone, and there is no right or wrong way, or time, to grieve.

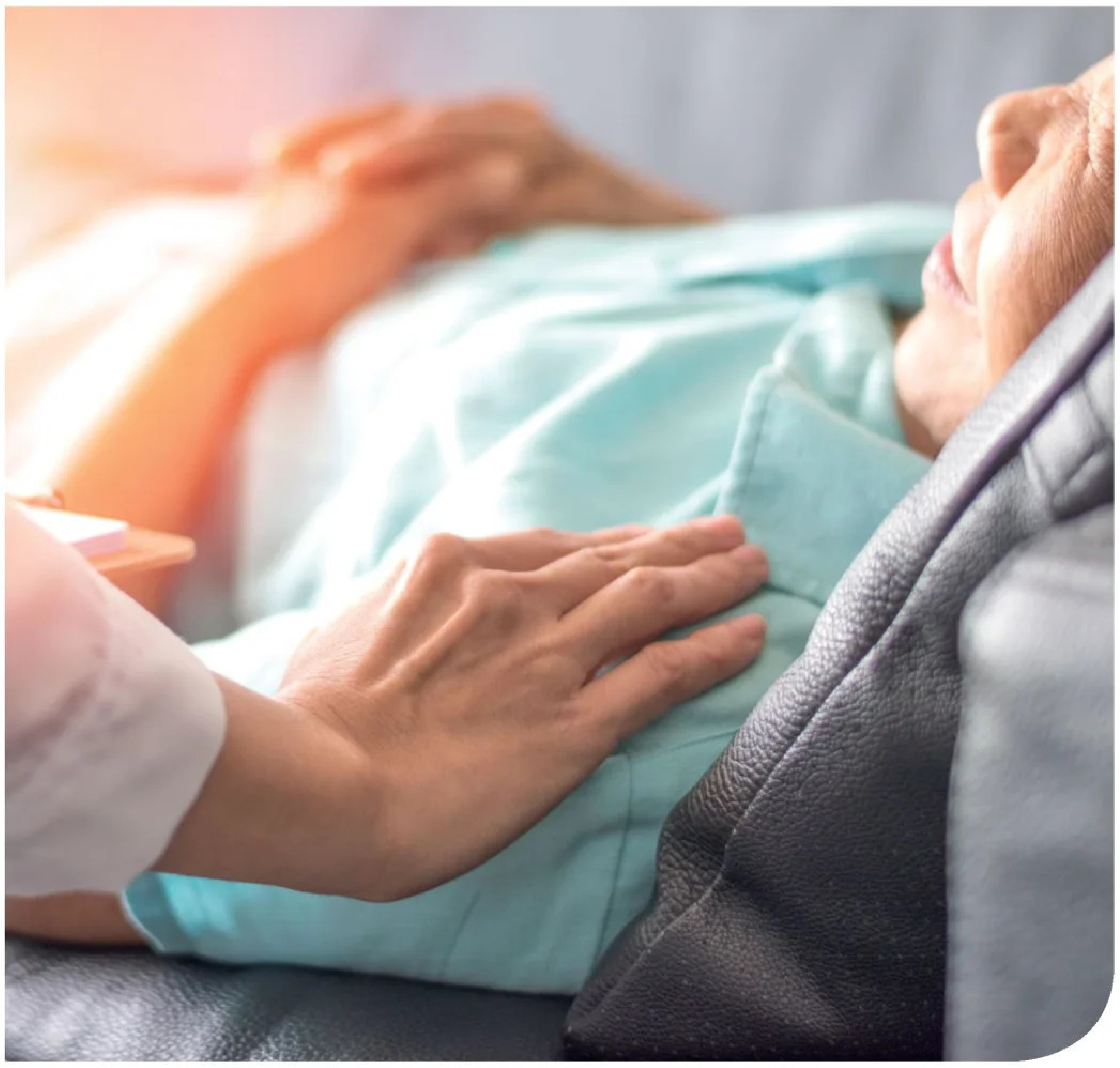
Does grief change with retirement?

It's not universal, but some people do handle grief differently when they have retired. For example, it is likely you'll have more flexible free time, and you may be able to spend more time with someone if they are dying, or take a more active role in their funeral arrangements. When you are retired and someone passes away, whether you are handling the estate or you are just thinking about that person and how they enriched your life, the number of interruptions to this thinking will be fewer, compared to having a full working life. Even smaller decisions, such as what to do with the ashes (if your loved one has been cremated) are easier to deal with with the luxury of extra time. More time doesn't mean that grief itself is handled more easily, however, and it might mean that periods of depression from a person's passing are harder to move out of without the distractions of a full-time job.

Where does it end?

There is one thing that most people who experience grief can agree on, and that is that the pain will ease with time. Even in the worst of circumstances surrounding a death, the more time passes, the less intense that pain will feel. Some people don't feel that they ever stop grieving, but that they do find a way to live with the memories of the person they've loved. There should come a point in your grief when the memory of your loved one makes you smile with fondness more than it makes you upset. This can take a long time, but it is a part of the process that will happen, when you feel that you are able to think about the person without falling to pieces. You may still be grieving, but it will be a sign that you are on the path through it.

> "One thing about the grieving process is that it is different for everyone"



THE ART OF REMEMBERING

If someone has died from a terminal illness, can you look past the last few weeks or months?

If the person has died from a drawn-out illness, it can feel easier to only focus on who they were at the end, which isn't a fair reflection of who they were in life. Many people are afraid that a terminal illness diagnosis means that the final weeks of life is how they themselves will be remembered by their family. It's a good idea to try to get some perspective of your loved one's whole life, mainly reflecting on when they were healthy. Try reflecting on their entire life in a state of mindfulness, and try and be as objective as possible. Remember what they did, where they went, who they were as a person, and try not to think about how that made you feel. Using photographs can help the process. Perhaps photographs of events that you weren't present for, or photographs during their childhood, which you can view more objectively. Remember, trying to think about your loved one without positive or negative thoughts is only for this mindful exercise, and it is designed to get you to look beyond their time just before death, which is not likely to be the time they would want you to remember them by.

Why use mindfulness when processing grief?

Mindfulness, as we've discussed earlier, is the process of drawing our own attention, or our 'mind's eye', on what we're doing right now. It is focusing on what we are experiencing right at this moment, without any judgement. Elsewhere in this bookazine we've discussed how mindfulness can be used very much like meditation, or as equivalent to consciously clearing your mind. Some people might feel pre-emptive guilt about considering trying to clear their mind when they are experiencing grief. We'll stress the point here that it is a temporary moment where you allow yourself to become centred, and your mind clear. It isn't about stopping grief, but pressing pause for a few minutes. We've discussed why mindfulness can be a useful tool in everyday life, and this includes handling the grieving process.

One aspect that we've briefly mentioned above regarding grief is that of allowing immediate challenges, whether they be everyday tasks, or dealing with the funeral or estate of the deceased, to distract us from acknowledging grief head-on. Although this isn't a universal approach, it is a coping mechanism that a lot of people will recognise. In the short term this can help alleviate pain, but it is psychologically unhealthy in the long term. Grief should be faced when it appears, and mindfulness can help with this. Firstly, by allowing you to clear your mind of the everyday thoughts that help distract you from grief, and secondly, by allowing you to process grief at your own pace. Although this sounds unusual, with practice you may be able to press pause on moments where grief is overwhelming, and allow yourself a mental break.

The worst side of grief can arguably be when it stops you from functioning normally. Grief can leave you feeling depressed, and unable to complete even basic tasks like driving, cooking, or washing clothing. Self-care is very important, and if some tasks are too hard to do right now, practising mindfulness can be a good method for moving grief to one side, if only for a few minutes. Mindfulness allows the opportunity to put all thoughts and feelings, including painful ones, aside by focusing on the exact moment. Like all skills, it needs practice, and it's unlikely you'll be completely successful on the first attempt. But through it, when grief is at its most painful, it can be an aid in taking a short mental break from those feelings, and giving yourself time to recover. With a clearer, more centred head, completing these everyday tasks should become just a little bit easier.

Because grief cannot be prepared for, it can feel like an unstoppable and overwhelming shift in our lives. Sometimes it feels like the negative feelings are all you can feel when you think about your loved one. Mindfulness can help as a reminder that grief is a process, rather than permanent. As discussed above, grief changes over time. Sometimes it can be more painful as you come to terms with what has happened, and this is usually the case in the early stages of grief. After time, however you manage your grief, things will get easier. If you can master mindfulness to put yourself in a state where you focus on the exact moment of the now, rather than constantly dwelling on the death of your loved one, you will have a degree of control over your state of mind, and this is a small reminder that however horrible it feels right now, grief will change, and the memories of your loved one will be easier to bear.

Ultimately, grief can be felt differently depending on where exactly you are in your life, and as mentioned above, it can't be wholly prepared for. Being able to use mindfulness as a technique can be a small aid in making the grief more bearable, particularly when it may be stopping you from living your life fully.

USING MINDFULNESS RELATING TO GRIEF

There isn't an easy way to get into the habit of thinking in a new way. Mindfulness takes practice, patience, and possibly many attempts. Many people are put off by the thought of trying to keep their mind clear of all thoughts, because our minds are by nature quite active and even unruly! Mindfulness doesn't mean keeping your mind blank or trying to block out thoughts, rather it is the practice of acknowledging thoughts and letting them go, while maintaining an unemotional, objective perspective.

We're going to go through this step by step

1 **First we're going to find somewhere quiet to sit, or perhaps lie down. Whichever you think you'll find most relaxing. If you can't find somewhere quiet, use calming music, or sounds of (peaceful) nature. Do this at a time where you know you've got ten minutes to yourself.**

2 Begin to focus on your breathing, perhaps count the number of breaths you take.

3 **This is harder than it sounds. You may find that you'll soon have thoughts trying to make themselves heard. Keep focusing on your breathing.**

4 When you find a thought popping up, acknowledge the thought for what it is. Try to do this objectively, which in this context means identify what the thought is, but not how it is trying to make you feel. This is the difference between 'Sad feelings caused by the thought of picking the right music for the funeral' and 'I know I need to pick the right music, and I'll do that later. Right now, I'm just focusing on breathing'.

5 **Then release the thought. Know that you'll come back to the thought later, but right now you're letting it go. There are a number of ways that visualisation can help. I like to imagine I'm on a hill on a sunlit morning, with a very slight breeze. I imagine I'm holding onto a leaf, or a piece of paper with the thought written on it. When I release the thought, the paper/leaf floats on the breeze down the hill, and towards the horizon, taking the thought with it. If the thought reappears, it goes on another leaf, and is released again.**

6 Then carry on breathing, keeping count. Just focus on your breathing. Perhaps think about the sensation of sitting down. Focus on one single part of your body, like the skin on your arm. Think about how it feels in the temperature of the place you're sitting. Keep your mind focused on that. If another thought appears, even if it's 'mindfulness is stupid and won't work for me', release it. Remember, you aren't judging whether these thoughts are true, or focusing on how you feel. You're just breathing. When you identify a thought or feeling that isn't related to breathing and sitting quietly, you name it, then let it go.

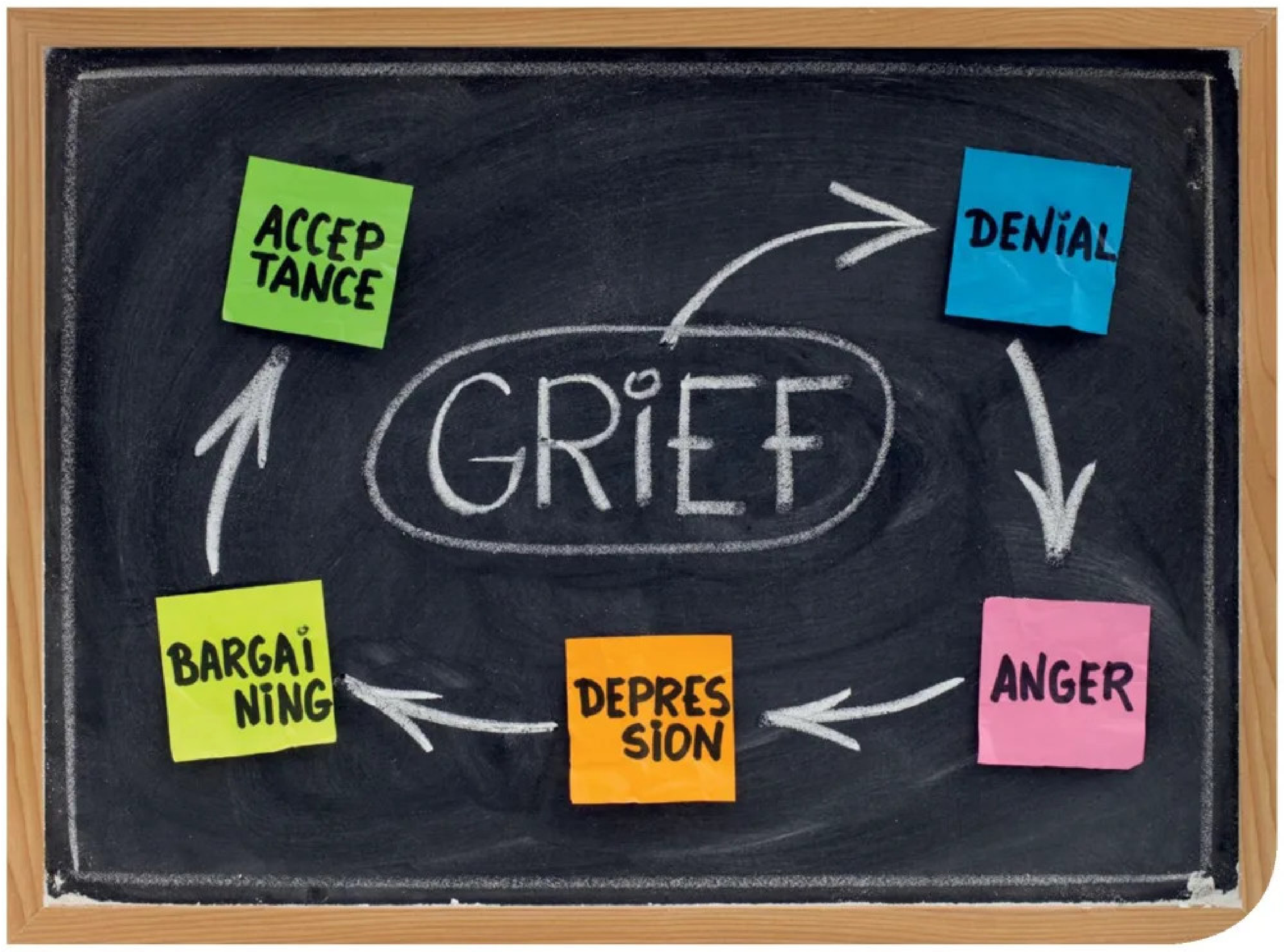
7 **Do this for a few minutes. You can have your eyes open or closed. You can imagine you're in any place you want, as long as it's quiet, and you are not going to be disturbed or distracted. It could be a library, or a park bench, or by the sea on a calm day. You don't have to imagine anything of course. However, imagining you are somewhere can make the visualisation of letting a thought go easier. After a few minutes, stand up, and slowly let go of this state of mindfulness. When a thought comes, identify it and then deal with it, whatever it is. If you can keep negative emotions to one side that is great, but if not, that's okay. You've just had a short mental break, and now you're picking up the normal thoughts again.**

Before reading any further, try this out a few times.

> “There might be a place that holds a special memory for that person”

Now let’s think about mindful states and handling grief

Let’s look at a hypothetical example around choosing somewhere to scatter the ashes, and feeling anxious that wherever you pick it will be the wrong place. If we were to approach this while in a mindful state, we would first focus on the fact that it is an undesirable task that still nevertheless needs to be done, and you may be in the position of making that call. We know what the person was like, we know the kind of places they would appreciate being remembered at, or still having a physical presence there. Even if they didn’t make their wishes clear, you can pick a number of places that they would likely not object to. Places of serenity and peace. There might be a place that holds a special memory for that person, or a place that had a special meaning for you both. If you have one or both of these as places that could be a good option, then it probably wouldn’t matter to the loved one which you picked. They would most likely feel happy about the amount of time you have spent considering this. In this example, using mindfulness is the difference between feeling anxious that you will make a mistake, and identifying why you feel anxious, providing it the proper context (it is an unpleasant task that you have to do) and allowing you to explore options that would be acceptable to the person in question, and doing all of this from an objective, mindful perspective.



FIND A WAY TO FACE THE UNCOMFORTABLE

How do we plan difficult tasks? Take a moment to think mindfully about what happens next

This should be attempted, ideally, when you are used to practising a mindful state. Note the words ‘used to practising’ – you don’t need to be a master of the skill yet, or an experienced meditator. This activity does not need to always be about the loved one who has passed, it can also be how to begin preparing for many difficult tasks you can’t think about starting.

What we are going to do is first reach a mindful state and are thinking just about our breathing, the place we imagine, or whatever has been working for you. Now, we’re going to just lightly consider what needs to happen over the difficult task. Try and maintain the objective state of mindfulness. For example, if you need to plan the funeral, try to picture it going ahead without focusing on how it might make you feel. Just take it step by step, planning on what needs to happen and when. Imagine that you need to make a list of what time things will happen, nothing else. When you come out of the state, write down what you’ve thought. Even when grief returns to its full strength, you will at least have a plan on how to deal with that difficult task.

Images, All Getty Images

UNDERSTANDING MEDITATION

Julie Bassett reveals what meditation is and how you can get started with this mindful practice

If you're interested in exploring mindfulness, a good place to start is with daily meditation. Meditation has lots of misconceptions attached to it, but it's a very useful and practical life skill that everyone can benefit from. But what is meditation?

Meditation simply means to give your attention to one thing, while remaining in a quiet and calm state for a set amount of time. Usually the aim is to prevent the mind from drifting into other thoughts, worries or stresses, and retaining that single point of focus.

It sounds very simple, but for many of us sitting still and in silence with a calm mind is difficult to achieve. We're so used to having lots of busy thoughts and things to do, that it can feel quite unusual to gently push this all to one side.

Meditation is nothing new. It was developed originally in India, with written evidence of its practice as far back as 1500 BCE. Meditation is present in many religions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Some of this meditation is focused on self-improvement, while others are based on spiritual reflection or prayer. Meditation is also associated with yoga, and many group sessions or classes will end with relaxation, which often takes the form of a guided meditation.

However, there is no need to be religious or spiritual, or to take yoga classes to start with meditation. Often the incentive to try it for the first time comes from a different place. It might be that you're looking for a way to cope with stress or busyness in your life. Or maybe you are hoping to find more meaning or purpose in your life, be more focused on tasks or improve your mental health and wellbeing.

It's important to note that while meditation is easy to learn in principle, it is a skill that needs plenty of practise to master. Those who have been practising mediation for a long time can fall into a calm state far more easily than beginners, enabling them to use these skills to help cope with difficult situations as they arise, for example.

"Meditation can help you adapt calmly to any changes in your life"

Why meditate?

Now that you know what it is, why should you build meditation into your daily routine? Well, it has a lot of benefits for people of all ages, but there are plenty that are particularly apt for older people. It's a practice that anyone of any age and any level of mobility can try.

One of its biggest benefits is in helping you adapt calmly to any change in your life, helping you to focus and deal with any stress. As we age, there are naturally lots of potential stressors that we might come across. Things like retirement, downsizing our homes, letting go of older children as they leave home, changes in our financial circumstances, physical changes in our bodies and so on, can all impact us in lots of different ways. Stress can lead to insomnia, depression, anxiety and even cause physical problems, like changes to our digestive system or headaches. By having a technique that you can use to manage your stress levels, you can get through these big life changes more easily and have the tools to cope with change.

Even if you are not feeling stressed, you might have other reasons to start meditating. For example, if you are not sure of your path in life, find it hard to settle or rest, or even need a little break from the noise of everyday life, meditation can offer an answer. We outline a few more of the potential

benefits in our boxout, but as you can see, there are many reasons to give meditation a go for the first time. And the great thing about meditation is that its effect is cumulative. The more you practise the skill, the better the effect it will have on your physical and mental wellbeing.

How to meditate

You don't need anything at all to start meditating, however there are a few things that can make the whole experience more enjoyable. Make sure that you have the time for your meditative practice; if you have a small time window and feel rushed, you won't get the best out of the mediation. Make sure that you won't be disturbed; if there is someone else at home, ask them to leave you in peace for the duration of your practice. Also make sure that you are comfortable and that you are sat or lying in a position and location where you can remain for the duration of the meditation session.

The simplest form of meditation is to simply lie down and close your eyes. Focus only on your breath going in and out of your body. Feel the sensation of it travelling into your body, filling your lungs, and again when you exhale. Your mind will try to wander naturally and you may not even notice at first that you've started to think about something else. This is completely normal. When you notice that you are thinking about something else, gently guide your focus back to your breath.

Many people find this first session frustrating, unable to stop their mind from thinking about other things. The feeling of calm and peace from a good meditation certainly doesn't come immediately – you have to practise and practise. Over time you will find it becomes easier to switch off your mind and focus clearly on one thing, which is usually the breath as it's easy and accessible to all. As you go through your meditative journey, you will find that the time between when you hold focus and when you get distracted gets longer, enabling you to stay in the moment for ever-longer periods of time, which is where you start to reap all those benefits.

This awareness of self, of the mind and its thoughts, is something that will then carry through your everyday life. You will start to find it easier to stop your mind from wandering and focus intently on whatever task you are doing, which is also what we mean by mindfulness.

To begin with, limit your meditation to around 15 minutes. This is enough to start to feel the benefits, but also you are less likely to get frustrated than if you start with a longer period of time.

Types of meditation

There are different types of meditation, of which we have already outlined the simplest. This breath technique is easy to start with, as it doesn't require anything

else. However, as you are completely reliant on yourself, some people find it hard to stick to.

If this is the case, you may prefer to try a form of guided mediation. These can be done in person, by attending a meditation class or workshop, or by engaging the services of a professional one on one. In these sessions, the teacher will talk you through a meditation, so rather than focusing on your own breath solely, you are focusing on a voice giving you prompts. The basic idea remains the same, in that if your mind wanders you should gently pull it back to what you are doing.

Guided meditations can also be followed at home. There are plenty of CDs, DVDs, websites and apps that have meditations that you can follow. If you have a smartphone, the two most popular apps are Headspace and Calm. In both of these you can choose a meditation to listen to. These vary in length and have different themes or intended outcomes. Some people find these kinds of apps useful, as you can track your progress, build your time and save favourite meditations for the future.

All guided meditations are different, but they have some common themes. Some will still focus on your breath, but may ask you to breathe more deeply and imagine your breath flowing around your body, reaching every organ in turn. Others may use the idea of light or warmth, which you focus on and 'feel' in your body as you focus. Others use visual techniques, where you will visualise an image in your mind and stay focused entirely on this. Some guided meditations are designed to relax you; others to energise you.

Some forms of meditation incorporate movement, focusing on the body and the way it moves. This can be something like yoga, but there are other forms such as walking meditation. You may also find

5 BENEFITS OF MEDITATION

There are lots of positives you might experience when you introduce meditation into your life – here are just a few

1 KEEPS THE MIND SHARP

As we age, we can find that our cognitive ability starts to decline. The focus required for meditation is great for exercising our mental strength, awareness and alertness. This can help us to stay sharp into later life.

2 MANAGES MOOD

Things like depression and anxiety can become more common with age. This is usually due to circumstance: living alone, family moving away, moving to a new house, finishing work, etc. Meditation can help to bring awareness to our thoughts and recognise how we are feeling, making us better able to cope or to ask for help.

3 IMPROVES ATTENTION

As we progress with our meditations, we learn to hold our focus on our meditation for longer and longer periods of time. This will help to improve our attention span outside of meditation, which can be handy if you're looking to learn a new skill for example.

4 RETAIN MEMORY FUNCTION

There is some evidence that suggests that regular meditation can help us with our memory, in much the same way that it keeps the mind sharp. In turn, this could potentially help reduce the risk of things like dementia.

5 PROMOTES GRATITUDE

The process of meditation can help us reflect on those things and those people that we are grateful for in our lives. The power of gratitude in your life can help with things like depression and anxiety, as well as enhance a feeling of purpose in our lives.

> "The more you practise, the better the effect it will have on your wellbeing"

that some meditations use mantras – phrases or sounds that are repeated over and over again to help maintain your focus. Some people find it easier to focus on a word or phrase than their breath. Others focus on an object, like beads, where you focus on the sensation of what you are feeling.

By experimenting, you will find the type of meditation that suits you best. But it's important to say that there is no 'wrong' way to meditate. As long as you are focused on something and you are aware of your thoughts, then you are meditating.

Obstacles to meditation – and overcoming them

You might have all the right intentions, but sometimes there are daily hurdles that can get in the way of our opportunities to meditate. It's good to recognise those and think of ways that you can overcome them.

The most common obstacle for most of us is finding the time. Life can be very busy, whether you are still in work or not. Many of us hold volunteer roles, look after grandchildren, see family, care for a partner, look after neighbours, have hobbies and clubs, go shopping, clean the house… It can seem like there is always something to do, that it can be hard to imagine carving out time to do something for ourselves.

And that is a second obstacle in itself. It can be very hard to put yourself first, to give yourself time to do something that is just for you alone. We spend so much time looking after others or working for others, that it can be a skill in itself to introduce a little self-care.

Therefore, it's important to put aside that regular time for meditation. Even if it's just 15 minutes a day, it can have a great impact on your health and wellbeing. Allow yourself that time to yourself, and remember that finding that time will actually benefit those around you too. As you are better able to control your own thoughts and feelings, to cope with stressful situations and to feel calmer in life, you will be better placed to carry out your daily tasks.

You might also find yourself getting easily distracted when you first start to meditate. We tend to externalise this – by blaming our lack of focus on the world outside, the noises from the street or the hum of a heating system. If you find it difficult to tune out the chaos, consider using ear plugs or headphones to help block out the distractions of the outside world. The more you get used to meditation, the less these external noises will bother you.

"It's important to put aside that regular time for meditation. Even if it's just 15 minutes a day, it can have a great impact on your health and wellbeing"

CREATE THE PERFECT MEDITATION ENVIRONMENT

With a few simple tweaks, you can turn a space in your home into your meditation oasis

Once you start to meditate regularly, it can help to have your own cosy space to use for your meditation. Having the right environment will signal to your brain that it's time to meditate, helping you slip into that mindset more quickly. Most importantly of all, you need to be comfortable. Think about whether you would rather sit or lie down, and arrange cushions or a chair to accommodate this. You may be staying in the same position for a long time, so ensure that you are well supported to stay still. You may have to prop some cushions or supports behind your back, for example. Keep a blanket to hand, as when you sit still for a long time, you might start to feel your body temperature drop. If you can wrap yourself up, you will be able to stay in the meditation longer. Also consider the lighting. Some people find natural light the most relaxing, so meditating near a window or outside on a warm day can help. Others prefer dimmer lighting, either from a small lamp or candles. Make sure that your space won't be disturbed by others during your practice, and check for anything like draughts that could make you feel uncomfortable.

Build a meditation routine

So, having determined that you would like to start meditating and having picked a method to try, whether solo or group, guided or not, you now have to start practising regularly.

Many people find it best to meditate first thing in the morning. For a start, you are already in a comfortable place and in comfortable clothes. Your bedroom is likely a place of calm and somewhere you feel at home, which all helps to create a good environment for meditation. You can meditate before you get up, so you are less likely to get distracted by daily tasks. It can also help to set you up for the day, meaning that you start the day calm and focused. You could try setting your alarm a little early to get your meditation done before anyone else in your home wakes up, giving you a moment of solitude.

Another common time to meditate is in the evening before bed. This can be helpful for reflecting on your day, putting aside any worries and getting you in a calm state before sleep. The only problem can be that you end up falling asleep. While meditation is relaxing, it's supposed to be a focused relaxation and not sleep, so you won't get the full benefit. One way to combat this is to stay out of bed and do your evening meditation in a chair, or on a cushion. You may also prefer to stay sitting up in this instance. That way you can finish your meditation before you get into bed for sleep.

But really it doesn't matter when you meditate. What is more important is doing it regularly and for that reason it can be useful to have a set 'time' to meditate. You may find it useful to link it to other habits you already do, so that you start to create a mental reminder. For example, some people like to brush their teeth before meditating – that way the brain starts to learn a pattern of routine and is ready to slip into a meditative state.

At first, you may have to remind yourself constantly to do your meditation, but over time, as you start to feel the positive outcomes of each session, you will yearn for that solo time to focus and it will become part of your daily routine with no effort.

> "Many people find it best to meditate first thing in the morning"

Images: All Getty Images

WHO IS MINDFUL EATING FOR?

Anyone has the capacity to be able to eat mindfully, to be in the moment and pay attention to what it is they’re consuming. You don’t need to be a mindful person or have done any formal mindfulness practice. Anyone can learn this approach to put themselves in the state of being mindful and switch off eating on autopilot. As a beginner, you can learn to induce a mindful state in that moment, and then with practice, you can develop the skill of mindfulness.

EAT MORE MINDFULLY

Pay more attention to the way you are eating, says Alison Morgan. Once you notice patterns and habits, you can take control

Mindful eating is about paying attention at the time of eating and noticing what you're thinking, feeling and eating through all five senses. It's about being conscious of your eating behaviour – what you're doing and when you're doing it. Think of it as the polar opposite to eating on autopilot.

By paying more attention to these things moment by moment, we can start to make conscious choices about what we're eating, and make wiser decisions that will help us in achieving health and fitness goals. The concept of good or bad food doesn't exist in a mindful-eating approach. It's about viewing food as fuel and therefore consuming energy to enable you to function throughout the day. Different fuel is of course helpful for different things, and mindful eating isn't about being perfect all the time; rather it enables you to be in a state where you can make conscious decisions about what to eat. So mindful eating is about:

Noticing

Be aware of what you're doing, thinking and feeling while eating.

Making conscious choices

Don't eat on autopilot, but be aware of what's going on in your mind so you can act more wisely and make choices.

Your story

Be aware of the stories you're creating about what, how and why you're eating. Notice any common themes, such as 'carbs make me put on weight' or 'I know these blueberries are nourishing and great antioxidants'. Once you become aware of your stories, you can start separating the story from the actual facts of the situation.

Being non-judgemental

Accept where you are right now with your fitness, health and body. Don't make any judgements about yourself for eating certain things, such as feeling guilty for eating a packet of crisps.

TELL-TALE SIGNS THAT YOU MIGHT NOT BE EATING MINDFULLY

- **You have a lack of awareness about your eating behaviour in all forms – what it is you're eating, when and why you're eating.**
- You especially lack awareness of why you're eating, because this can link to your relationship with food and emotions.
- **You don't remember what you've eaten all day.**
- You finish a chocolate bar (or other foods) without even noticing what it tasted like.
- **You get to the end of the day and realise that you haven't had one proper meal; you've just been grazing and snacking throughout the day instead.**
- You recognise that your behaviours are out of sync with other people, maybe eating in private or not eating at all.
- **You're fearful of foods.**
- You eat when you're not hungry.

HOW TO START MINDFULLY EATING

Psychologist Marina Grazier explains to us how you can embrace the concept of eating more mindfully. "First, decide why you want to eat mindfully. What's the benefit to you? Maybe it's to give you a release from dieting, or the freedom to eat what you want, when you want. Be clear about what it is you're looking to get out of adopting a mindful-eating approach, as this will motivate you to make changes and stick with them. Adopting this approach will be like embarking on a journey of change, and therefore needs some focus, attention, effort and dedication. You'll be rewiring your brain and creating new neural pathways, so allow yourself time to adapt. Accept it will be challenging and uncomfortable before it gets easier."

1. Experience eating mindfully

- **Find somewhere quiet where you can focus.**
- Start to eat something, thinking about what the experience is like through all five senses.
- **What does it look like? Pay real attention to it.**
- What does it feel like in your mouth or the rest of your body?
- **What can you smell?**
- What does it taste like?
- **What does it sound like when you bite and chew it?**
- As you're doing that, notice your emotions. What are you feeling about it? Is it joy, anger, sadness, disgust, guilt or judgement on yourself?
- **Notice any thoughts you have, such as 'this tastes great/not good' and what stories are running through your mind like 'I'm proud to be nourishing my body with this apple'.**
- Developing the capacity to know what you're thinking and feeling in the moment when you're eating is the key starting point. Try to experience eating for what it is. The reality of eating a cake is that you're consuming a source of fuel and a mixture of butter, sugar, eggs and flour. Your thoughts and feelings may be of guilt, or thinking it's going to ruin your diet, so the more you can separate facts from stories, the easier it is to make conscious choices.

2. Build on this experience

Build on your mindful experience and start to practise it more frequently. Do what works for you and fits in with your lifestyle, but make a plan of when you're going to practise it. Whether it's breakfast every day or one day a week, make a conscious decision and commitment to focus on eating mindfully at that time.

3. Long-term changes

After you've been practising putting yourself in a mindful state with food on a regular basis, start to notice how it's changing your eating. Are you making better choices, are you eating less, do you notice when you're full, or maybe you only choose a bag of crisps once in a while as opposed to once a week? If it helps, keep a diary and track it over a few weeks, identifying any triggers. Often people have a powerful experience once they apply some awareness and it becomes crystal clear what's happening, so the choices are easier to make.

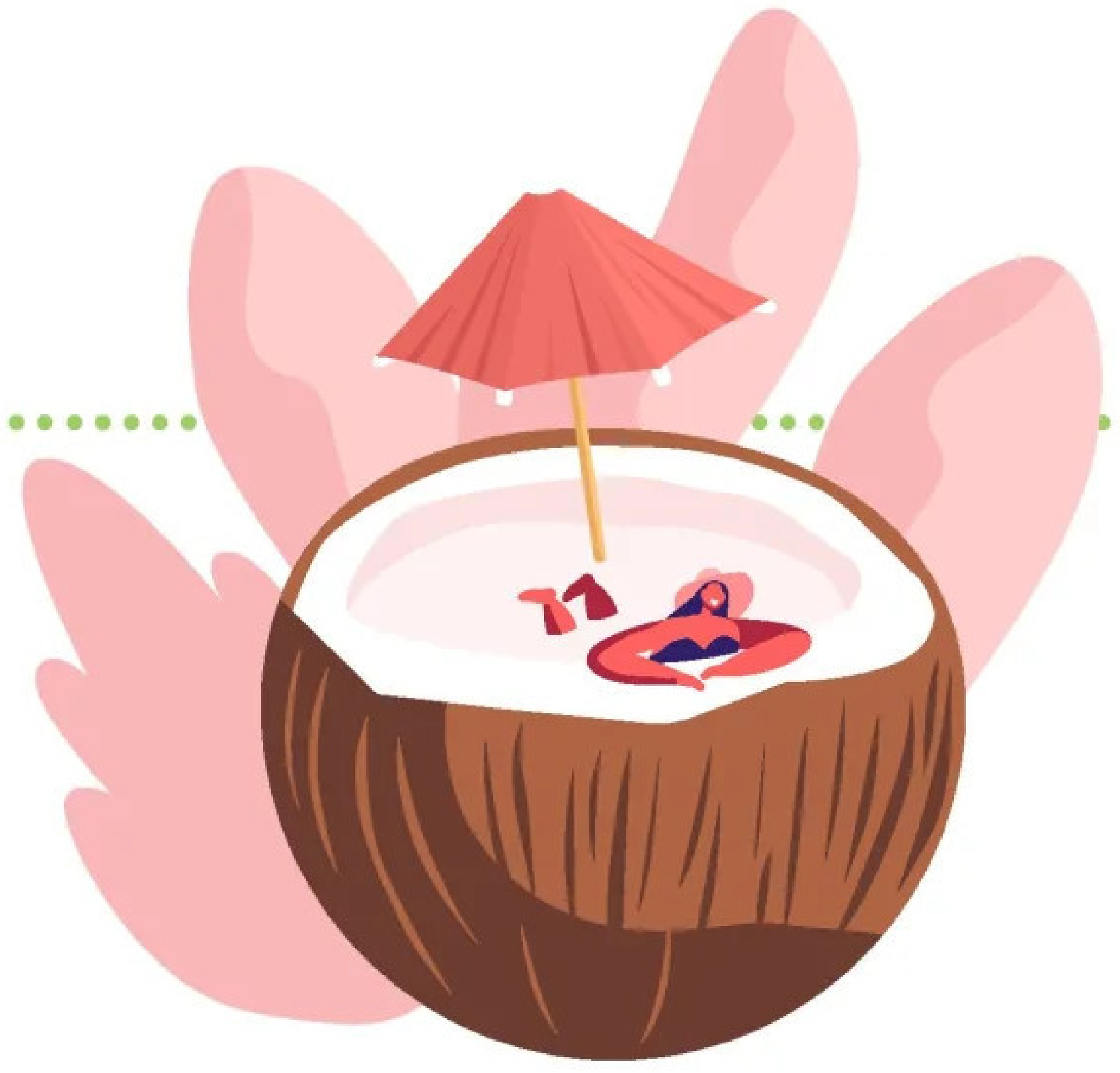
There are no forbidden foods because you're making conscious choices about what to have, but you can still apply principles of personal food preferences if you feel they're the right choices for you. You might see a shift in your relationship with foods. You may find you don't even enjoy certain foods anymore, and can have chocolate or biscuits around the house without having to eat them.

BENEFITS OF MINDFUL EATING

Mindful eating can give you a route to happiness that's enduring. Happiness doesn't come from the external stuff like cars, houses or being a certain weight. It comes from within, from your own experience of acceptance, self-compassion, non-judgement and knowing you're in control. Therefore if you can nurture your internal experience, you're not having to abuse your body or relationship with food to feel a sense of worth. Other benefits include:

- **It can flush out whether you're an emotional eater rather than eating when you're actually hungry. You can then start to tackle the root cause of your emotional distress and manage your emotions better instead of blocking them out and smothering them with food.**
- It can be empowering to know you are in control rather than making emotional food choices.
- **It can change your relationship with food as you start making wiser choices about what you eat.**
- It can give you liberation and freedom from food's mercy and fear of food.
- **It's a long-term lifestyle change and can be an alternative approach to following a restrictive or quick-fix diet.**
- If you can start to view food as fuel, you'll recognise when you're eating in ways that are not supporting your healthy behaviour.
- **It can reduce binge eating as you simply cannot eat in this way if you're being mindful. The more you develop being mindful, you can start to intercept binge-eating behaviour or learn to stop it before it starts. Through mindful eating, you begin to recognise the triggers, thoughts and feelings that are happening so you can stop, then make a choice about how to proceed.**

DEVELOPING THE SKILL OF MINDFUL EATING OVER TIME



So how long will it take for you to start feeling the impact and benefits of eating mindfully? And how often should you ideally be practising to develop the trait or skill of mindfulness? Unfortunately, this is difficult to answer because there are many factors at play, such as the amount of time per day/week of practising, the quality of the practice, and the individual's propensity to learn. Just like learning to drive, we all take different amounts of time to learn new skills.

Recent research in workplaces where mindfulness is being trained and practised has identified benefits from practising ten minutes or more a day over an eight-week period. Psychologists argue on the length of time it takes to develop new habits, but most think it's between 30 and 90 days.

This is a great starting point for practising your mindful eating, and you should start to see benefits after eight to twelve weeks if you're practising for at least ten minutes a day. But view mindful eating as a lifestyle change and an ongoing commitment. Training and rewiring your brain is just like training your body to change; it takes time and requires continual attention and practice. Just as with exercise, you might face a relapse where you've got a really busy period at work, with no time to prepare healthy food, so you grab a sandwich at lunch and a takeaway for dinner. That turns into two or three days and you forget the importance of healthy eating or your mindful-eating practice, so everything takes a downward spiral. It's okay! We're human beings and life happens, so don't judge yourself and beat yourself up. Show yourself some compassion, treat yourself like you would your best friend and just start again when you can. Explore what triggered you to stop so you can watch out for those signs in the future. Recruiting a friend to help and support you is always really helpful – someone you can rely on and give you moral support when these times happen.

Marina Grazier is a psychologist and thought leader in helping people master their minds and flourish through mindfulness. She takes mindfulness into workplaces around the world, and mentors teachers of mindful eating through her business, The Mindfulness Exchange. Marina pioneers taking mindfulness to people wanting to protect their health and wellbeing in the face of our modern lives and chaotic eating behaviours. For more information, visit **mindfulness-exchange.com**.

HOW MINDFUL EATING CAN TRANSFORM YOUR LIFE

After more than 30 years of trying different diets that only resulted in yo-yo weight loss and zero self-esteem, Helen James had to look for a different solution to end this cycle of misery. Mindful eating was that solution, and it has also led her on an exciting journey of setting up Nutriri, a not-for-profit organisation helping to support and educate others facing challenges concerning unhappiness with food and their bodies.

“Mindful eating means having an end to the chaotic food thoughts and choices; In essence, being present with what I have chosen to eat”

What’s your history with diets and your relationship with food?

My ‘dieting career’ easily spanned three decades, from my mid-teens to early 40s. I consistently yo-yoed with my weight, which cycled incrementally between 9 stone and over 18 stone. I was often joining slimming clubs or trying more extreme crash diets. On reflection, I also probably clung to smoking cigarettes on and off too, believing that they caused me to eat less.

What led you into mindful eating – how did you come across it and why?

My well-meaning friends and relatives used to support my food-restriction efforts with weight-loss praise. That ‘singing when you’re winning’ phase felt like all was well in the world because I was being successful in reducing my body size. Then I’d reach a plateau in my weight, which triggered an increase in self-loathing and, inevitably (it seemed), full weight regain. This cycle was depressing; leaving me with a real sense of zero self-esteem and a return to the ‘oh sod it!’ diet. Eating with moderation felt very alien and possibly something someone was born with; certainly seeming forever out of reach to a chaotic binge eater.

It was the depression and anxiety state that led me to an eight-week mindfulness course, and very early on in those eight weeks, I had the tiniest of insights into my relationship with food. I realised that I needed to stop subscribing to the belief that it was something or someone ‘outside of me’ that would help me lose weight, and that change can only come from inside. That tiny insight grew quite powerful; to such an understanding that I knew everyone struggling with food needed to know.

What does mindful eating mean to you?

To me personally, mindful eating means having an end to the chaotic food thoughts and choices; in essence, being present with what I have chosen to eat.

How did you start practising mindful eating?

Believe it or not, I wrote a script! In the beginning it felt quite engineered and awkward. I’d have to ask the family to be quiet around the table (my teenagers thought I was losing the plot!). At first, bringing focus to each sense in turn seemed to heighten my awareness of all sounds, sights and so on, and I was labelling them as distractions. I wouldn’t say I’m overly spiritual, so I was looking for a way to be practically present; cycling through each sense and noting what was there. Over time and with practice, I found it easier to be absorbed in the joy of food again, and the kids were happy that I no longer insisted on awkward silences around the dinner table!

How easy did you find the experience?

Lots of us can resonate with the phrase 'I have no problem enjoying food' or 'my problem is that I enjoy food too much'. So to align mindful eating with any intention (of weight change, up or down) is to place as much emphasis on hunger signals and fullness signals and begin to view mindful eating as something to put us back in control of our food, instead of at the mercy of diet culture.

What benefits have you experienced?

I've reclaimed the hours and hours wasted each day to meal planning and miserable shopping to fit in with different family food ideals. For me it's been about overcoming disordered eating, not passing it on to our teenagers, and generally reaching a place of calm. I like myself now.

How easy has it been to maintain?

I've lost that 'all or nothing' mentality. That feeling of 'I'm either on a diet or I'm out of control' that fuelled my old weight cycling habits. Alongside mindful eating, I have learnt to embrace my body and stop beating it up for what it's not. It doesn't feel like an effort to maintain – it's an approach that's with me for life.

How did your experience with mindful eating turn into a business idea?

For a good few years before discovering mindful eating, I found myself fed up with the repeated conversations I was having with friends about joining a slimming club – again! It was like we all felt resigned to carry on with the same old cycle of body loathing and restricted eating for weight loss. It was definitely a feeling of being trapped in a societal paradigm of expectation for everyone to be slim. All I can recall was losing my fear of being judged long enough to get going and open our first group.

How was Nutriri born?

I didn't really have many answers back then; it just felt like it was the right time. Enough was enough and no one else seemed to be coming along with other solutions to tackle things like eating disorders and obesity. In the UK, the cost to society from the impact of eating disorders is estimated at £15 billion per year (**beateatingdisorders.org.uk**) and we spend around £500 million each year to stand on scales at slimming clubs. I just knew that these two figures were connected, and I had a burning desire to help others make a lasting change from feeling less than good enough. We are a mission-led business; passionate to make this social change but astute enough to make it pay for itself. I didn't really know what a social enterprise was, but I asked Lloyds Bank, Big Lottery and the Dartington School for Social Entrepreneurs for help and they did! We received a small grant and mentoring to learn how to be in business. We are fundraising to train our first round of clubs to open around the UK, and already have

future social franchise/licensees further afield. We are developing a work skills programme, to find and enable those with true 'lived experience' of the problems we are alleviating, to train and run groups of their own.

> "Training and rewiring your brain is just like training your body to change; it takes time"

What were the learnings that you wanted to share with people?

The body positive movement is gathering pace, and social media is reclaiming space for ALL bodies. Aside from active positive role models, nutriri.org felt that an 'in real life' support network was needed, a compassionate alternative to slimming clubs; especially as our first members at the group were lower-weight individuals asking for help with body confidence and food chaos, both men and women.

What does Nutriri do?

We create safe spaces that teach mindful eating and body confidence, but it's more than that. We coach and support an individual theory of change in people without judgement. So if you have the mindset 'I want to accept my body as it is but also wish to change weight', we will support that. If you've previously over exercised or over restricted your eating and want to find food/body ease, we will support that too. If you have had weight-loss surgery and are still searching for wellbeing around food and/or body, we will support that. We don't divide and conquer for profit; we work with ALL bodies and minds, recognising the value of sharing and supporting together. The weekly groups are designed to be welcoming and fun, non-shaming and nurturing (it's what Nutriri means).

What's next for Nutriri?

In addition to training, funding and opening our first groups across the UK, we offer a free course via our website, nutriri.org. We're also creating an accreditation route for existing health, fitness and nutrition professionals who feel their practices are combined in a weight-loss focus and are interested in a new approach. We want nutriri.org to be so effective at helping people that we run out of 'customers' as soon as possible!

Get in touch with Helen at **helen@nutriri.org** if you'd like to find out more and be part of this huge social shift in diet culture and positive body acceptance. Or visit **nutriri.org** for more information and to access a free Body Confidence and Mindful Eating course.

Images: All Getty Images except headshots H. James/ M. Grazier

WORLD CULINARY TOUR

Over the following pages, uncover delicious, hearty recipes from around the world that are as good for the soul as they are for your health

KULAJDA

Small on ingredients, but big on taste, this is a soup like no other

Servings 6

Prep Time 20 MINS

Cook Time 20 MINS

An unusual creamy-sour but tasty mushroom-based soup widely eaten in the Czech Republic, particularly in the winter. It may be cheap to make, but it's also packed with nutrients and fibre. In some regions of the Czech republic, another similar soup is made with sourdough, but kulajda gets its distinctive taste from soured cream or milk and vinegar. Often this unique-tasting soup is served with a poached egg, which complements the flavours in the soup perfectly. The ingredients are simple, but the flavour really packs a punch.

INGREDIENTS

- **500 g | 17½ oz | 4 cups mushrooms, cut into big chunks**
- 3 tbsp butter, plus more for cooking
- **3 tbsp wheat flour**
- 1500 ml | 53 fl oz | 6⅓ cups boiling water
- **4 allspice berries**
- 1 bay leaf
- **4 medium potatoes**
- 250 ml | 9 fl oz | 1 cup cream
- **2½ tbsp vinegar**
- a pinch salt
- **a pinch pepper**
- 4 tbsp sugar
- **6 eggs**
- 4 sprigs fresh dill

RECIPE

- **Step 1** Cook the chopped mushrooms in a frying pan with some butter until they turn golden.
- **Step 2** In a large soup pot, heat the 3 tbsp of butter, then add the flour and whisk constantly for 1-2 minutes. The mix should begin to brown to a peanut colour.
- **Step 3** Now, keep stirring the mixture as you add in the boiling water. Bring this new watery mix to the boil, then add the allspice and bay leaf.
- **Step 4** Peel then cut the potatoes into 2 1/2-cm | 1-in cubes and add them into the boiling broth. Leave to boil for 10 minutes, then add in the cooked mushrooms.
- **Step 5** Continue to cook the broth until the potatoes are completely cooked.
- **Step 6** Next, add in the cream, vinegar, salt, pepper and sugar, and continue to boil for 2 more minutes.
- **Step 7** In a separate pot, poach the eggs in boiling salted water with a splash of vinegar.
- **Step 8** Chop the fresh dill and add it into the soup, then remove the soup from the heat and cover.
- **Step 9** Serve the soup in bowls, and place an egg on the top of each.

TIP

If you're afraid of poached eggs, simply whisk the eggs all together and pour into the hot soup. Stir through until the egg is cooked.

Images: All Getty Images

RAMEN

This slurpable noodle dish is famous for its tender hand-sliced pork and rich, salty broth

Servings	Prep Time	Cook Time
2	2HRS 30 MINS	30 MINS

Served in endless bowls of steaming, salty umami broth, ramen is by far one of the most popular Japanese foods both in the country and worldwide. There is no single type of ramen, as the noodle shape and size will depend on the region they originate from, and interestingly so do the flavour profiles too! You could try the rich, thick, milky-white tonkotsu pork bone broths originating from Kyushu Island, or shoyu (meaning soy) ramen with its delightful clear, brown chicken or vegetable-based stock, for example. Fatty slices of pork belly, crisp seaweed, crunchy bamboo shoots, a boiled egg, spring onions and aromatic oil are just some of the tantalising toppings carefully added to each ramen bowl.

INGREDIENTS

- **50 ml | 1¾ fl oz | ¼ cup mirin**
- 150 ml | 5¼ fl oz | ⅔ cup sake
- **2 tbsp granulated sugar**
- 50 ml | 1¾ fl oz | ¼ cup soy sauce
- **250 g | 9 oz pork belly**
- 2 eggs
- **ice bath**
- 2 tbsp sesame oil
- **1 onion, chopped**
- 2 cloves garlic
- **1 shallot, chopped**
- 1 L | 35 fl oz | 4¼ cups chicken stock
- **4 heaped tbsp white shiro miso**
- 160 g | 5⅔ oz | dried ramen noodles
- **4 pieces nori**
- 4 spring (green) onions, chopped
- **1 tbsp sesame seeds, to garnish**

RECIPE

- **Step 1** Preheat the oven to 180ºC (160ºC fan) | 350ºF | gas 4.
- **Step 2** Combine the mirin, sake, sugar and soy sauce together.
- **Step 3** Put the pork belly into an oven dish and pour over the soy sauce mixture. Make sure the pork belly is completely covered.
- **Step 4** Cover with tin foil and cook for 2 hours, turning over occasionally.
- **Step 5** Rest the pork belly.
- **Step 6** Meanwhile, heat up a saucepan of water and boil the eggs for about 51/2 minutes. Remove and immediately place in an ice bath.
- **Step 7** Heat up the sesame oil in a pan. Fry the onion, garlic and shallot until golden.
- **Step 8** Add the chicken stock and miso, and cook on a low heat until the miso dissolves. Simmer for 15 minutes.
- **Step 9** Slice the pork belly into 7.5-cm | 3-in thick pieces.
- **Step 10** Remove the eggs from the ice bath and carefully remove the shells. Cut in half, making sure the yolk doesn't spill, and set aside.
- **Step 11** Cook the ramen noodles according to the packet instructions in unsalted water.
- **Step 12** Drain the noodles and divide them in half between two big bowls.
- **Step 13** Carefully ladle the miso stock into the bowls and assemble the pork belly slices, egg halves, nori and spring onions on top. Garnish with sesame seeds.

TIP

If you're afraid of poached eggs, simply whisk the eggs all together and pour into the hot soup. Stir through until the egg is cooked.

Images: Alamy

ENCHILADAS

This hot, hearty Mexican dish couldn't be any easier to make at home

Servings 8

Prep Time 30 MINS

Cook Time 15 MINS

From the streets of Mexico City to your dinner table, enchiladas are always a family favourite – especially in southwestern USA, where they have become a real highlight in the fusion Tex Mex cuisine. Stuffed with cheese, beans, meat and vegetables, they make for a quick and easy dinner that can be customised to suit any and all tastes. The combination of hot, melted cheese, a spicy and creamy sauce, and soft tortillas is hard to resist, so we bet you'll be going back for a second helping within minutes of your first bite.

INGREDIENTS

- **1 tbsp sunflower oil**
- 1 brown onion, thinly diced
- **2 cloves garlic, minced**
- 1-2 tsp brown sugar
- **1 tsp ground cumin**
- 1-2 red chillies, sliced
- **400 g | 14 oz | 1¾ cups chopped tomatoes**
- 250 g | 8¾ oz | 1 cup tinned kidney beans, drained
- **400 ml | 14 oz | 1¾ cups vegetable stock**
- 1 tsp paprika (use smoked paprika for a BBQ flavour)
- **1 tsp lime juice**
- Salt and black pepper, to taste
- **150 ml | 5¼ fl oz | ⅔ cup single cream**
- A handful fresh coriander (CILANTRO) leaves, chopped
- **2-3 tbsp olive oil, for greasing**
- 8 tortilla wraps
- **200 g | 7 oz | 1 cup refried beans**
- 125 g | 4½ oz | 1 cup cheddar cheese, grated

To garnish

- **125 g | 4½ oz | 1 cup cheddar cheese, grated**
- A handful coriander (CILANTRO) leaves

RECIPE

- **Step 1** Preheat the oven to 175°C (155°C fan) | 350°F | gas 3.
- **Step 2** Heat some sunflower oil in a large pot and fry the onion until it's translucent and soft. Then add the minced garlic, and fry for 1-2 more minutes until browned.
- **Step 3** Add the sugar, and fry for 1-2 minutes to caramelise. Then add the cumin and chillies, and fry until aromatic.
- **Step 4** Add the tomatoes, kidney beans and vegetable stock, and bring to the boil. Once it is boiling, add the paprika, lime juice, and salt and pepper.
- **Step 5** Simmer for about 15 minutes to get rid of most of the liquid, tasting and adjusting the seasoning as desired.
- **Step 6** Stir in the cream, add the fresh coriander leaves, and remove the pot from the heat.
- **Step 7** Grease a large rectangular baking tin with olive oil. Lay a tortilla wrap flat onto a plate, and spread a generous dollop of refried beans on it. Then, scoop about 2 tbsp of enchilada filling into the centre of the wrap. Top with a small handful of grated cheese.
- **Step 8** Fold the wrap over the filling, and roll it up to make a long, narrow tube, then place in the pan.
- **Step 9** Repeat steps 7 and 8 for the remaining 7 enchiladas.
- **Step 10** Pour the remaining enchilada sauce on top of the enchiladas, being sure to give them an even coating. Add the grated cheese on top.
- **Step 11** Bake in the oven for 15 minutes, or until the cheese has just melted, and is starting to get a golden-brown colour.
- **Step 12** Remove from the oven and garnish with coriander leaves. Leave to cool for 5 minutes before serving.

TIP

Customise your sauce by adding meat, different types of beans, mushrooms, peppers, sweetcorn or any other vegetables you have in the cupboard!

Images: Getty Images

LAMB TAGINE

Slow-cooked to perfection, this iconic Moroccan stew is a flavourful crowd-pleaser

Servings	Prep Time	Cook Time
4	15 MINS	2HRS 45 MINS

A deliciously tender, slow-cooked stew, Morocco's tagine has been a part of the country's culture and cuisine for centuries – found everywhere from roadside stalls to high-end restaurants. The dish is named after the instantly recognisable earthenware pot in which it is traditionally cooked. While the base of the pot is wide and shallow, the cleverly designed conical lid traps steam and condenses it, returning moisture to the food as it cooks. Though many believe the recipe can be traced back to the eighth century, it also makes a cameo in One Thousand and One Nights. Today, tagines can be cooked in a variety of ways, and a tagine pot is not required.

INGREDIENTS

- **600 g | 21 oz lamb, cubed**
- Salt and pepper, to taste
- **120 ml | 4¼ fl oz | ½ cup olive oil**
- 1 medium onion, roughly chopped
- **3 cloves garlic, crushed**
- 1½ tsp ginger powder
- **1 tsp turmeric**
- 1 tsp cumin
- **1 tsp ras el hanout**
- ½ tsp cinnamon
- **1 L | 35 fl oz | 4 cups water, plus more as required**
- 2 carrots, roughly chopped
- **3 sweet potatoes, peeled and cubed**
- 75 g | 2½ oz | ⅓ cup sultanas
- **3 dates, pitted and finely chopped**
- 1 tsp butter
- **1 tbsp fresh lemon juice**
- 1 bunch parsley, to garnish

RECIPE

- **Step 1** Put your cubed lamb in a bowl and season with salt and pepper. Set aside.
- **Step 2** In a saucepan, heat the olive oil over a medium heat. Once hot, add the lamb, onion, garlic, ginger, turmeric, cumin, ras el hanout and cinnamon. Mix well and cook uncovered for about 10 minutes, stirring regularly.
- **Step 3** Add 1 l | 35 fl oz | 4 cups of water, cover with a lid, and simmer for about 2 hours over a low heat. Stir occasionally and add more water if needed.
- **Step 4** Add the carrots, sweet potatoes, sultanas and dates, and add more water to cover completely. Cover with a lid and simmer for 20 minutes, until the carrots and potatoes are tender.
- **Step 5** Add the lemon and butter, and continue simmering, uncovered, until the sauce has reduced.
- **Step 6** Garnish with the parsley and serve immediately with a side of bread or a portion of couscous.

TIP

For a kick, add a tablespoon of cayenne pepper or serve with a side of harissa

Images: Getty Images

MISSISSIPPI MUD PIE

A chocolate-lover's dream, this rich and indulgent Southern dessert belies its humble origins

Servings
8-10 SLICES

Prep Time
30-40 MINS

Rest Time
3-4 HRS

Cook Time
1 HR

The irresistible combination of a crunchy crust, deliciously gooey chocolate filling and fresh whipped cream is an all-American classic. It gets its somewhat strange name from the fact that its brownie-like filling resembles the deep brown mud along the banks of the Mississippi River, which hardens and cracks as it bakes under the summer sun. This devilishly good pie was developed by home cooks after World War II. It traditionally uses ingredients that were affordable and easy to find in the post-war supermarkets, but modern variations can include extras like marshmallows, chopped nuts and even cookie chunks to make Mississippi's signature pie extra special.

INGREDIENTS

For the pastry

- **250 g | 8¾ oz | 2 cups plain (all-purpose) flour**
- 3 tbsp cocoa powder
- **A pinch fine sea salt**
- 150 g | 5¼ oz unsalted butter, fridge-cold and diced into small cubes
- **3 tbsp light brown soft sugar**
- 2-3 tbsp water

For the filling

- **175 g | 6 oz | ¾ cup unsalted butter**
- 175 g | 6 oz | ¾ cup dark muscovado sugar
- **175 g | 6 oz | ¾ cup dark (bittersweet) chocolate, melted and cooled slightly**
- 4 eggs, lightly beaten
- **4 tbsp cocoa powder**
- 1 tsp vanilla extract
- **2 tsp coffee granules (optional)**
- 300 ml | 10½ oz | 1¼ cup double (heavy) cream, whipped
- **2 handfuls pecans or walnuts, roughly chopped**

For the topping

- **250 ml | 8¾ fl oz | 1 cup double (heavy) cream**
- 1 tbsp icing (powdered) sugar
- **1 tsp coffee granules (optional)**
- 50 g | 2 oz | ¼ cup dark (bittersweet) chocolate, melted and cooled slightly
- **8-10 pecan halves (one per serving)**

RECIPE

- **Step 1** To make the pastry, sift the flour, cocoa powder and salt into a large bowl. Add the cubes of butter and rub the mixture together between your thumbs and fingertips until it resembles breadcrumbs.
- **Step 2** Stir in the sugar. Keep stirring as you add the water bit-by-bit, until the mixture starts to come together. Knead lightly with hands until dough is soft, then wrap it in clingfilm (plastic wrap) and chill it in the refrigerator for 15 mins.
- **Step 3** Preheat the oven to 190°C (180°C fan) | 375°F | gas 5, and line or grease a 23 cm | 9 in pie tin.
- **Step 4** When the dough has chilled, roll it out in a rough circle around 1/2 cm | 1/5 in thick. Carefully lift the dough and place it over the prepared pie tin, gently pressing it into the base and sides. Trim off any excess from around the sides with a knife – use these leftovers to seal any gaps or tears in the pastry.
- **Step 5** Line the pastry crust with baking paper and fill the base with baking beads (pie weights) – if you don't have baking beads, you can used dried beans or uncooked rice. Bake in the middle shelf of the oven for 15 minutes.
- **Step 6** Remove the case from the oven and very carefully remove the baking paper with the beads (they will be very hot; pour them into a heatproof container until they cool). Return the pastry to the oven for another 10 minutes, after which time it should be

TIP

Instead of a pastry base, try a crust. For an extra cocoa hit, you could make it using Oreos or chocolate digestives.

firm and starting to crisp up. Set aside to cool.

- **Step 7** Reduce the oven temperature to 160°C (150°C fan) | 325°F | gas 3. Start preparing the filling by beating the butter and sugar together (with a handheld or stand mixer) until pale and fluffy. With the mixer on a slow speed, add the melted chocolate, eggs, cocoa powder, vanilla, coffee (if using), cream and chopped nuts until everything is incorporated.
- **Step 8** Pour the filling mix into the cooled pastry case, and bake in the middle shelf of the oven for about 30-40 minutes. The filling should be set and slightly cracked on top. Remove from the oven and leave for several hours to cool completely in the tin.
- **Step 9** For the topping, stir a few spoonfuls of the cream together with the icing sugar and coffee granules in a large bowl until everything is combined and there are no lumps. Add the rest of the cream and whisk (either by hand or with a mixer) until it has thickened and holds together well. Be careful not to over-whisk or the cream may separate.
- **Step 10** Spread the mixture over the cooled pie filling with a spoon, or – for a neater finish – pipe the cream (as pictured) across the top. Drizzle with the melted chocolate and arrange the pecan halves evenly around the edge. If not serving immediately, cover and refrigerate until it's time to serve.

Images: Alamy

GET FIT IN RETIREMENT

Alison Morgan explains how you can turn swimming and cycling into mindful activities

Cycling and swimming are two activities that many of us take part in, whether for exercise or pleasure. Cycling could be a part of our transport, or we might take our family swimming at the weekend, but we rarely think about the mindful benefits.

Whether taking part in a cycle or swim alone or with others, by focusing more on the way we feel when doing these activities, the more we can improve our mental health and wellbeing. In this chapter, we will explore how to make your swimming and cycling more mindful.

CYCLING

Cycling for reasonably long durations and at a good pace is about rhythm. Battling with the bike, the elements or yourself will rarely result in the bike going faster. So, applying focus and being present to all of the things that can affect the bike going faster – such as position, clothing, equipment, weather, technique, goal, state of mind (the list could go on…) – really does matter. And when all of these elements are rolled into a combined 'readiness', the benefits experienced can really be felt.

The preparation of your bike – tyres pumped up, lights working and so on – is a given, but how often do we prepare our minds? Thinking about what we want to achieve out of the ride – for example how we're feeling now versus what feeling we want to experience at the end of the ride; or what sections we know are going to be tough – are important considerations.

Sometimes though, it's less about achievement and more about escapism. Remember that time you first rode your bike to wherever you wanted? Do you remember that feeling of freedom and independence? As adults, that feeling is still there for the taking and sometimes exactly what we need. So, if you're 'just' out for a ride, immerse yourself in the positive feeling of escaping into whatever world you want to go to.

Any exercise is known to release chemicals into your bloodstream that help a whole array of potentially damaging symptoms such as stress, illness, fatigue and lethargy, plus of course the more physical benefits of weight control. But don't underestimate the benefits of cycling with a friend or a group. Apart from having a chat, developing friendships and sharing some of the pain of that 10 per cent gradient, the human spirit is often drawn to the pack mentality, feeling safer in a group.

Cycling with a group can bring more emotional benefits too, where the togetherness and connection between cycle-buddies gives you a feeling that the solitary rider won't always discover.

Getting back in the saddle

Almost all of us would have ridden a bike when we were kids. The journey from the tricycle to the stabilisers to that first, wobbly foray into two-wheeled propulsion – it holds great memories. And then, for some of us, it stopped, while others took it further and it became a hobby, or a method of commuting to work. Either way, there's no more efficient way to get about fast and under your own steam, while picking up all the benefits of such a great, low-impact exercise along the way.

Cycling in the UK is still riding the wave of the boom in the late noughties spear-headed by Team GB's success at the Beijing Olympics. This has been compounded by great initiatives such as the Boris Bikes in London, the growth of cycle lanes in cities and towns, and the recent domination by British riders of cycling's biggest race, the Tour de France. This means there are more bikes, more routes, more gear, more support and more information than ever before to get going on your two-wheeled friend, and discover places your feet or your car can't, realistically, take you – so get discovering!

MINDFUL CYCLING

If you want to get more out of your cycles, here are some simple ways you can turn it into a more mindful experience:

- **Notice how you're feeling in your mind before you start. Are you feeling focused on your ride or is your mind distracted? Try scanning your body from your feet to your head, and notice how each is feeling. Notice any areas that feel like they need more warming up or stretching.**
- Focus on your breathing, especially if you feel your mind wandering.
- **Focus on the motion and feeling in your body, for example the burn in your legs when climbing a hill!**
- Be grateful to every part of your body for having the strength and ability to carry you through this ride.
- **Be present and notice your surroundings, while staying safe on the bike!**
- Try taking a different route so you're not operating on autopilot.

> "There's no more efficient way to get about fast and under your own steam"

Getting more out of cycling

The greatest athletes in the world have coaches and are always learning. The best bikes money can buy, with the latest kit, will not make anyone a great rider. Even the fittest of riders with the best equipment, need an often-ignored element – the one between the ears – to get the very most out cycling.

Unless you're a track cyclist where power and speed are paramount, cycling is most often an endurance pursuit. By definition, this means repetition of an (ideally) efficient skill, in order to conserve energy and move as rapidly as possible. How often has the first hour of your ride been quick, sharp and purposeful, but the last hour languid, laboured and lethargic? Yes, nutrition and hydration play a huge part, but fatigue in your legs is only part of it. Mental fatigue is just as debilitating. So, give yourself cues or triggers to 'self-check' your current status on the bike as you progress through your ride. Try some simple ones like these on your next outing:

- **Cadence** – Your RPM often drops when you're getting tired. Stick to 85rpm or above to keep the legs fresh.
- **Position** – Are your hands and fingers loose on the bars? Are your shoulders relaxed and low? Is your lower back and pelvis relaxed without rolling over the saddle too much?
- **Bite-sized goals** – What does the next 10K look like? Is there a hill that you'd like to beat your PB on? Do you have a power meter and, if so, are you going to increase your average power over the next section? Are you going to stop at the top of the next hill at that coffee shop and treat yourself to a slice of carrot cake?

Being mindful about where you are (on the road, right now, as well as in the context of your training plan) helps maintain the mental focus that ensures the physical aspects of exercise don't get the better of you.

Fatigue, or a drift in concentration, won't have a chance to happen if you are self-checking and living in the moment of your ride. Try it next time you go out and see how you can use these exercises to transform your cycling, improve your fitness and bolster your welbeing.

SWIMMING

Swimming isn't just about clocking up laps in the pool and exercising on autopilot. Adding some mindful techniques to your swim will help you make more of your workout. Or why not try exploring the growing trend of outdoor open water or 'wild' swimming, which comes with huge mindful benefits.

Something for everyone

Pool swimming and swimming outdoors can offer very different experiences and benefits, so there really is something to suit most people if you have a basic level of ability. If you have lower confidence or can't swim yet, there's a multitude of lessons available, and it's a great life skill to learn even as an adult. Remember, it's good to step outside of your comfort zone and learn something new. Swimming can also be a relatively cheap and easy-to-access exercise, and has the added benefit of being low-impact.

In the pool

It can be easy to go through the motions, swimming up and down doing lengths of a pool on autopilot. Before you know it, 30 minutes has passed in a blur. Or maybe your mind is drifting, chattering and thinking about the busy day you had and all the things you still need to do at work, home and in life. There's nothing wrong with this, but are you maximising the effects of your workout and time in the pool? And are you being fully present and mindful about your swim, which could help focus your mind on the here and now, reduce anxiety and bring about a state of heightened calm? Try these things to make your pool swim more mindful:

- **Raise your heart rate and check your effort levels** – It can be easy in a pool to stick to the same pace for your session. This won't get you fitter any faster and may be boring. If you're not feeling much warmer than when you got in the pool, or if your breathing rate is the same, try increasing the intensity of your stroke.
- **Zone out from distractions** – Try waterproof headphones or bring your attention to focus on something like your breathing, your stroke technique and rate, or the feeling of your body gliding through the water.
- **Try a new stroke** – Learning anything new will help focus your mind, as you've got to actively think about what you're doing. It's also great to challenge yourself in different ways to strengthen both mind and body.
- **Add variety** – Keep things interesting by changing your swim workouts with things like intervals (for example, swim faster for a couple of lengths, then slower for a couple lengths), or grab a float with outstretched arms and just use your legs for a certain distance. Be creative and challenge your body in different ways!
- **Do it to relax** – Swimming can be really relaxing, and it's important that we all find time and ways to help us relax. So you don't always have to be training hard; it's okay to go for a swim to help switch off and relax.

“Pool swimming and swimming outdoors can offer very different experiences and benefits, so there really is something to suit most people”

SWIM ON THE WILD SIDE

Open water or wild swimming is a totally different type of experience from swimming in a pool. Swimming in natural waters like lakes and rivers can be totally exhilarating. It's about connecting directly with nature, having no restrictions like lanes in a pool, and will push you mentally and physically in a different way. Here are just some of the benefits from taking a plunge on the wild side.

Body benefits

- **Improves your circulation** – Jumping into cold water sends the blood pumping to your organs helping to flush impurities. Repeated exposure to cold water is thought to improve a person's circulation.
- **Benefits your immune system** – Regular swimming in cold water can actually give a boost to your immune system by increasing your white blood cell count significantly.
- **Burns calories** – Your body is working harder to keep you warm, so more calories will be burned in the process.
- **You'll become a better swimmer** – Wild swims will make your body work harder as you battle against different elements, like currents, temperatures and winds.

Mind benefits

- **Makes you feel alive and calm** – It offers a mental escape in nature, away from the busyness of an indoor pool.
- **In the zone** – Swimming in a pool can become monotonous, but swimming outdoors with so many things to focus on (your route, the wind, the current and so on), it'll be hard not to be fully focused in the present moment.
- **You'll be pushed out of your comfort zone** – Facing the unknown of what's in the water, how deep it is, and whether your body will cope are all great for your resilience and strength of character, and will bring a great sense of achievement.
- **Different challenges** – There are more ways to push yourself outdoors; different routes for all abilities, bigger loops and different lakes. How far, how cold and how much you push yourself is up to you!

Inclusive community

- **Wild swimming often comes with a supportive community** – Everyone is training for different goals and reasons, so you'll find someone who can offer advice and support you need to improve your technique.
- **Inclusive** – You'll find a whole mix of ages, body shapes and genders trying wild swimming, and there's no vanity involved – it's all about keeping warm!

Wild swimming can be seasonal depending on where you live and the weather, so check out clubs and lidos near to where you live to find out when and how to get started.

Safety should come first with wild swimming, so join a club where you can get support and advice on the right things to wear and a training plan to follow, especially if you're trying it for the first time. And most of all, enjoy it! It's a whole new experience.

NEW TO SWIMMING

Does the thought of putting on your swimming gear and walking into a pool have you running for cover back to the changing rooms? It can be intimidating for a lot of us, but try not to let that put you off. Remember that everyone else is probably feeling just as self-conscious the first time they do it. Remind yourself of the mindfulness element of being non-judgemental to yourself. Be proud and satisfied with your body where you're at right here, right now. Be proud of yourself for wanting to make your body fitter and stronger, and for taking action and steps in your own fitness journey. Focus on yourself and nobody else. Try not to compare yourself, but rather stand tall in your own beautiful skin.

Make your swim more mindful

Whether you're in a pool, lido, lake, river or the sea, take these steps to make your swim a more mindful one:

1 CHECK YOUR FEELINGS

Before you get in, think about how you're feeling. Take a few deep breaths through your nose, and focus on any sensations in your body – are you excited, anxious or distracted? Pay attention to any feelings while you're breathing. You don't have to wish the feelings away; just be curious with them.

2 MINDFULLY ENTER THE WATER

Enter the water and really feel all of the sensations on your body. What does the water feel like on your skin? Are there any changes to your breathing?

3 CONCENTRATE ON YOUR STROKES

Swim! Find your rhythm whatever the stroke you're doing. Feel each stroke and focus on how your arms feel entering and leaving the water. What can you hear when your head is in and out of the water? Feel any changes in the water temperature as you glide through it and focus on your technique and stroke.

4 MIX IT UP

Try swimming differently and see what experience that creates. Try underwater or swim on your back and, if you're outside, look at the clouds.

5 CELEBRATE ACHIEVEMENTS

At the end of your swim, be grateful for the strength in your body for getting you through the session. Feel the emotions of pride for what you've achieved. Even if the swim didn't go to plan, don't beat yourself up or judge yourself. What did you learn from the swim and what will you do differently next time?

Images; All Getty Images

YOGA FOR ALL

Laurie Newman chats to One For All Hot Yoga studio and learns why yoga studios are a safe and inviting place to restore the body and replenish the soul

In 2018, One For All Hot Yoga opened its doors to the people of Bournemouth, nestled in the heart of the UK's south-coast town. This aptly named studio believes in the idea that yoga should be inviting to all. The owners, Lucy and Jesse Ward – who met each other in Melbourne, Australia – flew back to their home turf on the southern shores of the UK to realise their dream of opening their own yoga studio. We caught up with them for a chat about what hot yoga is, why it's so great for the mind, flexibility and strength; why community is at the core of their studio; and why you should give it a go!

Q At One For All you teach mainly hot yoga classes. How does hot yoga differ from normal yoga? What are its key benefits for the body and mind?

A We love the term 'normal yoga' but yes, hot yoga is a little different. The studio is heated to 38 degrees Celsius with infrared panels like you might find in a maternity ward. We add humidity to raise the heat index so the room feels hotter. The sequences change weekly depending on the teacher or the time of year (or even the phase of the moon), and we practise to music. There's chanting, and the teachers often provide hands-on adjustments. The heat helps to raise the heart rate so the practice becomes an efficient cardio workout as well as developing strength and flexibility. It also encourages the release of hormones in the body that help soften through the myofascial system, and you sweat heaps, which is cleansing and detoxifying. Finally, it helps with the breath (or prāṇāyāma), and focuses the mind on your practice so you get that wonderful sense of clarity after class.

Q What's the best part about being a yoga teacher and having your own studio to teach in? Has it always been a dream of yours?

A As soon as we started practising, we wanted to teach, and as soon as we started teaching, we wanted to open our own place. Teaching is so rewarding and doing it full time, in a beautiful studio we put together as a family, with the wonderful, dedicated yogis of Bournemouth, we just feel so lucky.

Q Having been to your studio, your students often talk about the community One For All has. Why is community at the heart of your studio?

A We've practised all over the place; in posh studios, gyms, living rooms, pubs, and what makes you fall in love with a studio are the people, the teachers, the students, being welcomed whoever you are, wherever you are on your yoga journey. Nothing makes us happier than seeing two of our students leave the studio together chatting about some common interest. We want people to feel good about coming here, have a great practice and feel good afterwards.

Q People who are new to yoga can find it intimidating going to their first class. They may be put off by the fact they feel unflexible and they can't touch their toes. What piece of advice can you give to people starting yoga for the first time?

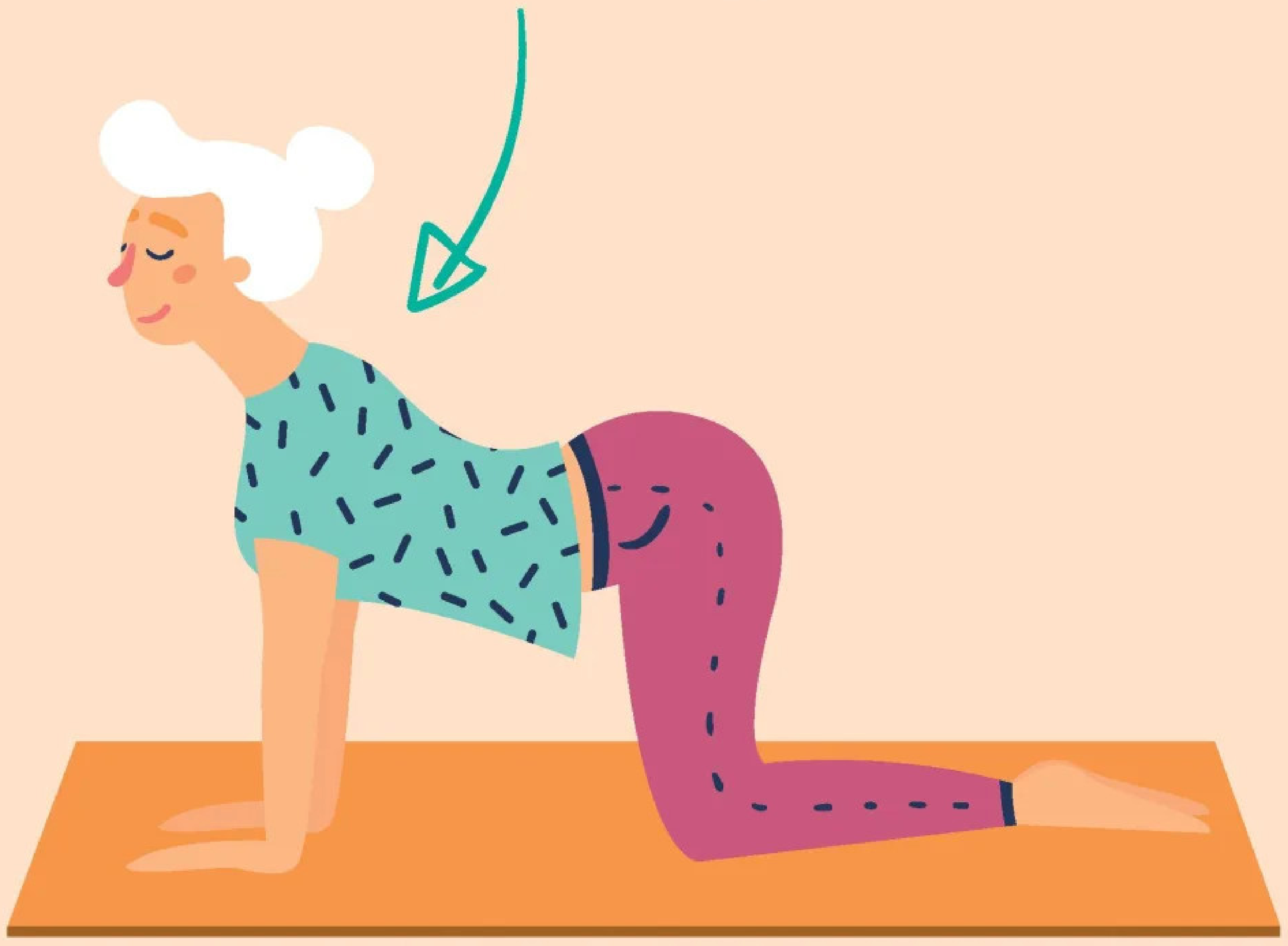
A It's so daunting attending your first class; even just going to a new studio can be pretty scary. The three things we always try to communicate to our new students are: 1. Don't worry – everyone here with you has been in the same boat as you, maybe last week, maybe several decades ago, but everyone had to have their first class. 2. Try to leave your expectations at the door and embrace the new experience – it's going to be tough, but fun and super rewarding. 3. Finally, if it doesn't feel good, don't do it. Take your time; you don't need to do every posture or every vinyāsa – just do your own practice.

GET IN TOUCH

One For All Hot Yoga
oneforallhotyoga
W oneforallhotyoga.com

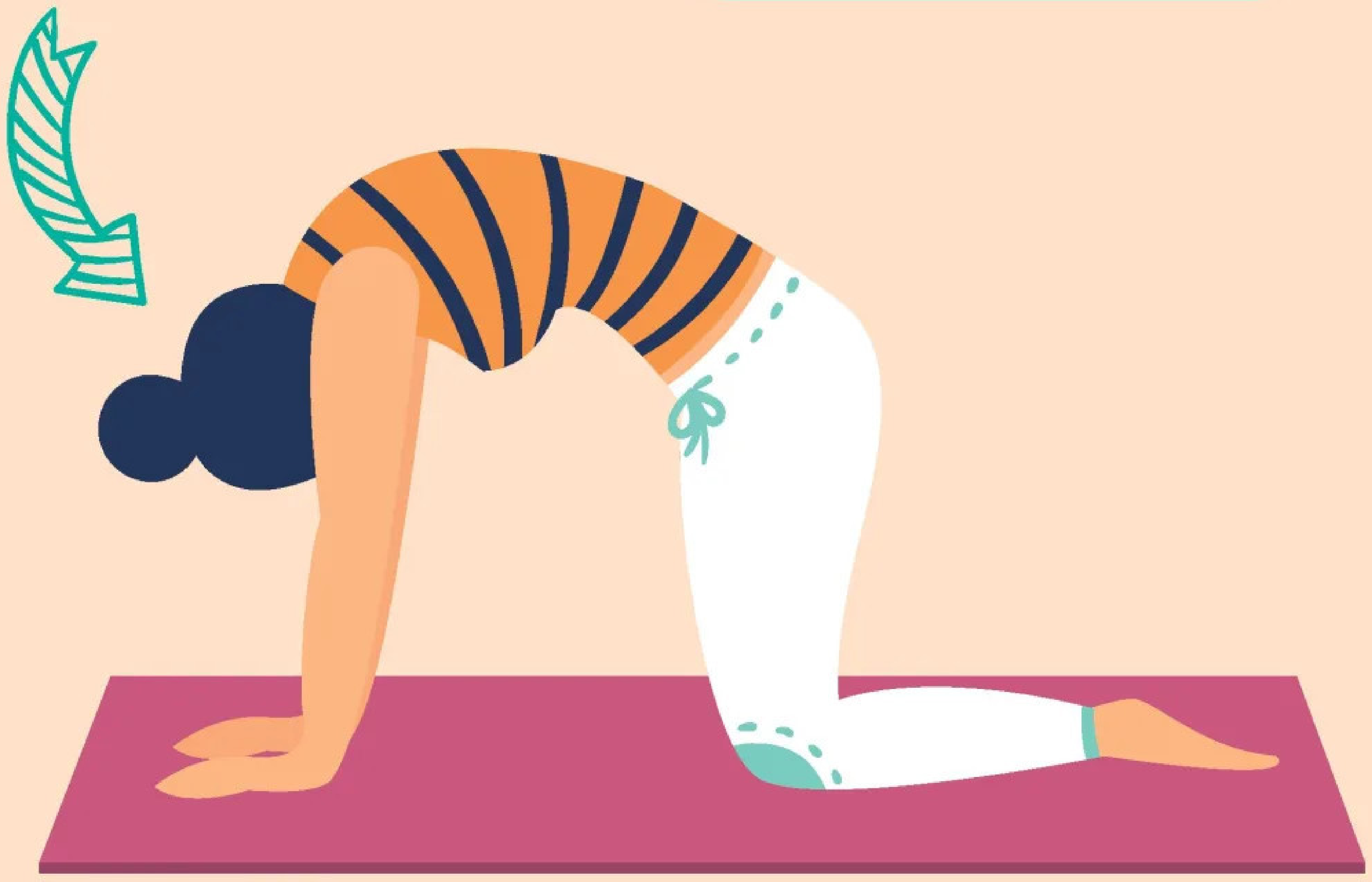
CAT *OR* MARJAIASANA

Great as a slow warm-up when you first reach your mat. This pose massages your internal organs and provides a steady stretch for the spine.



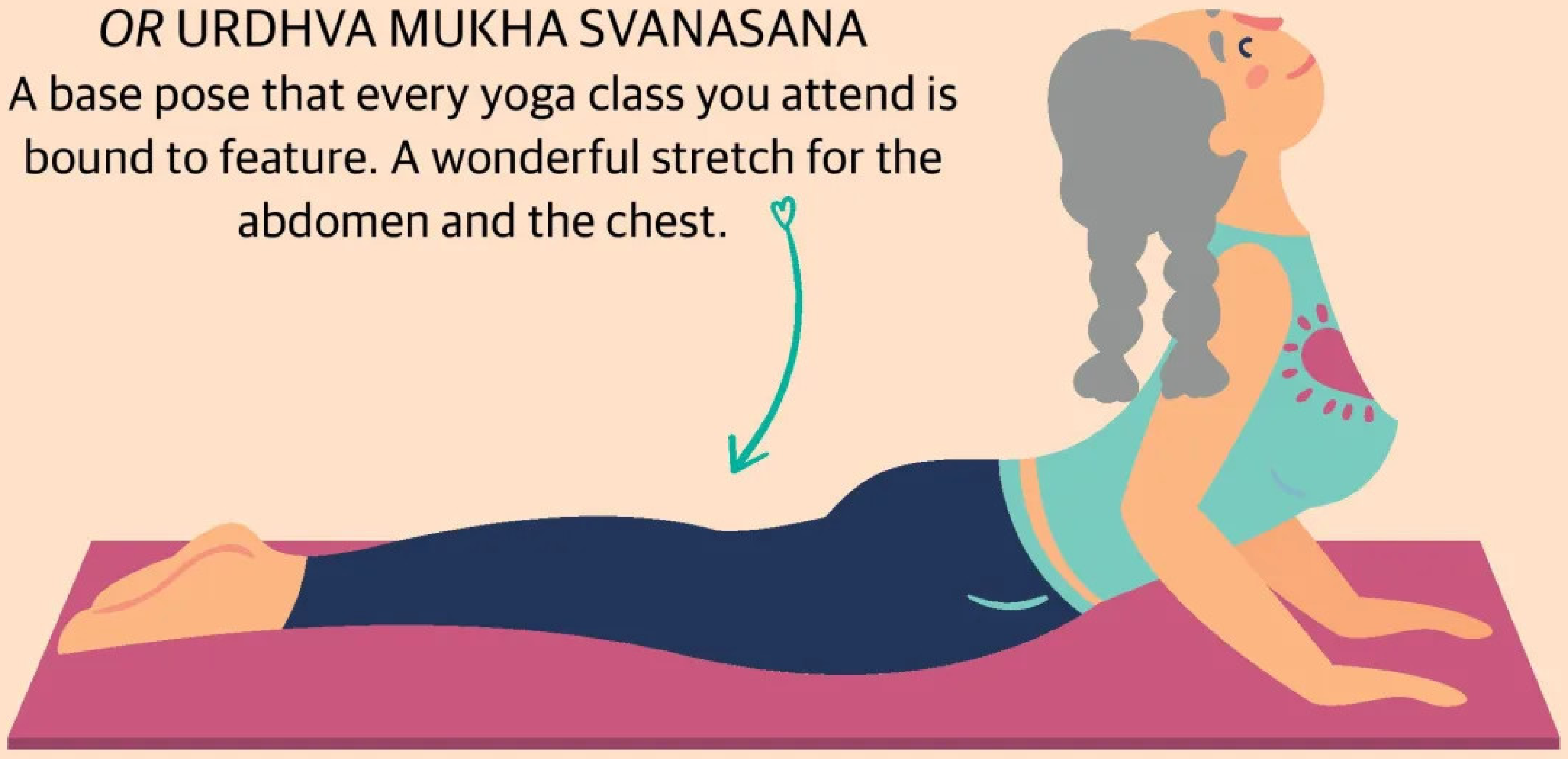
COW *OR* BITILASANA

An easy pose that is a great one to try if you are new to yoga. Paired with the cat pose, this spinal stretch is perfect for warming your body slowly.



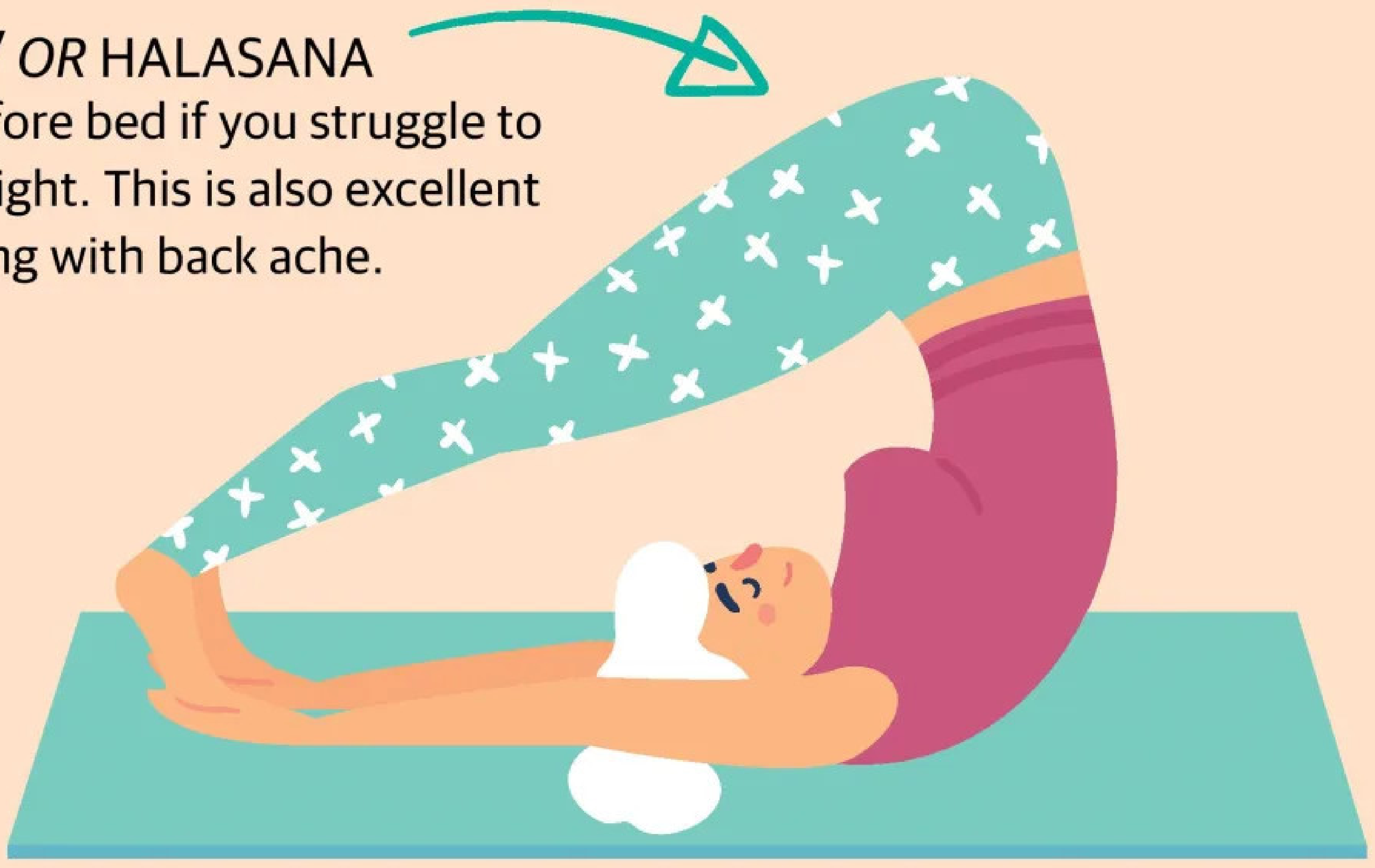
UPWARD-FACING DOG *OR* URDHVA MUKHA SVANASANA

A base pose that every yoga class you attend is bound to feature. A wonderful stretch for the abdomen and the chest.



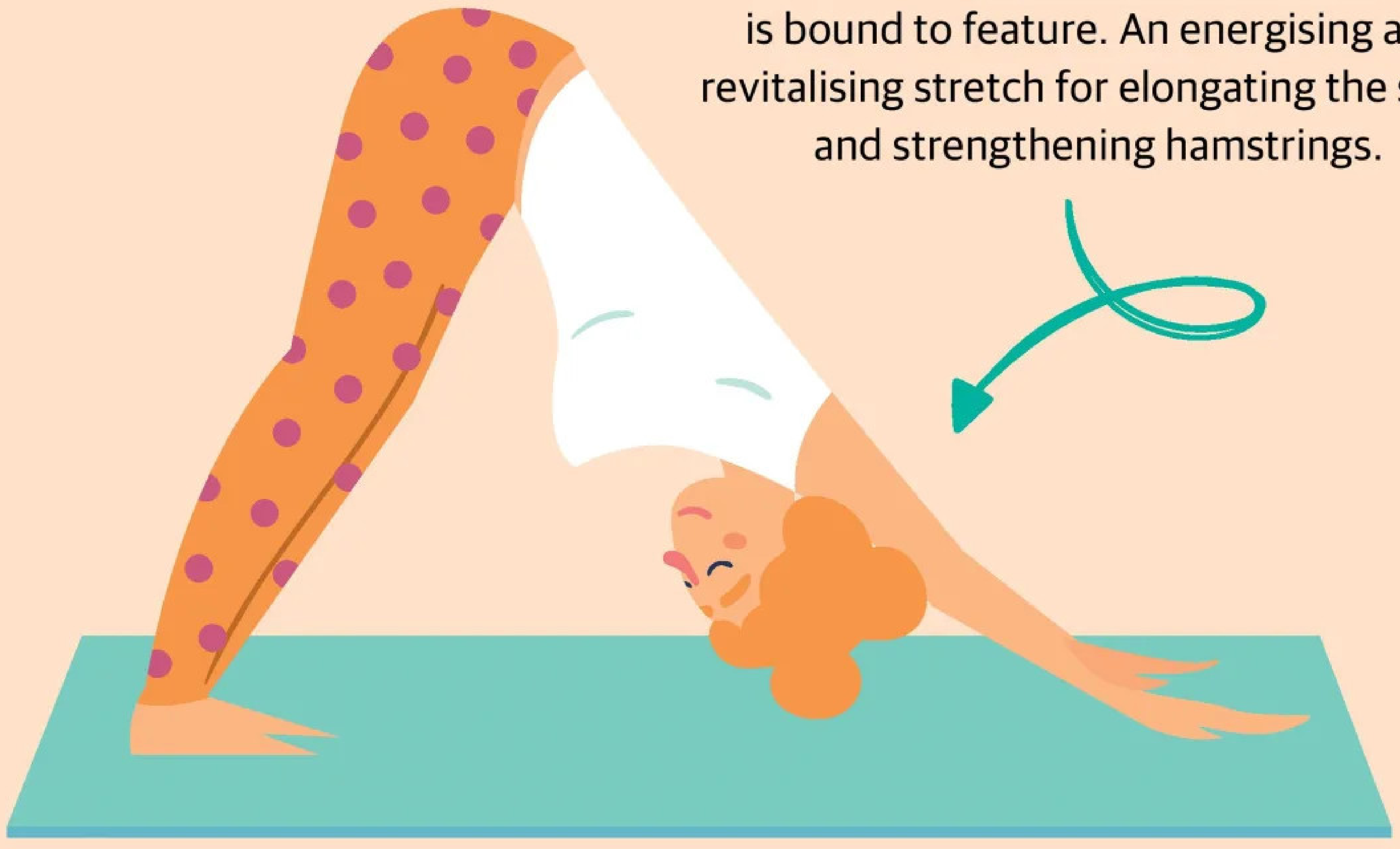
PLOW *OR* HALASANA

Try this pose before bed if you struggle to get to sleep at night. This is also excellent for helping with back ache.



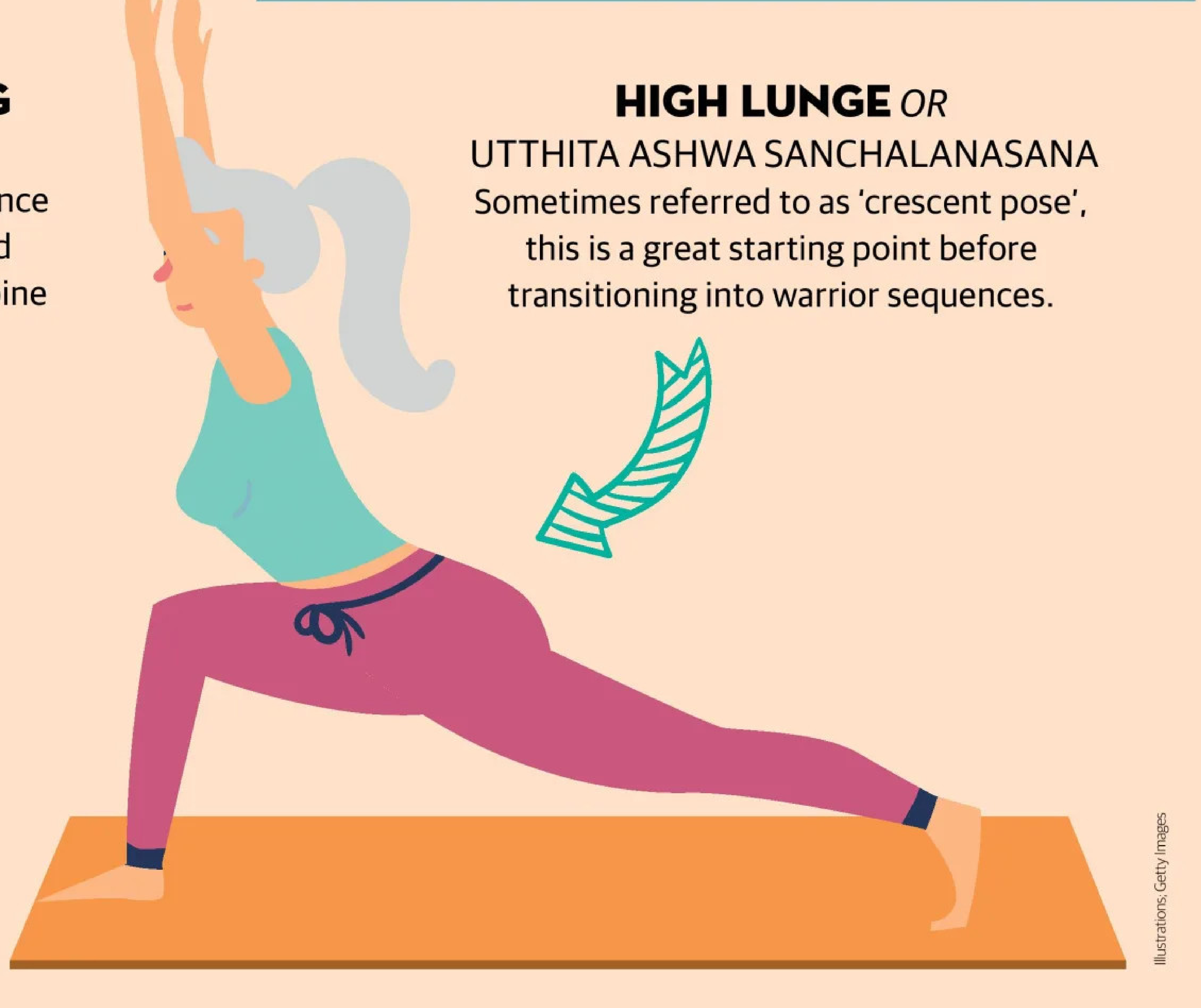
DOWNWARD-FACING DOG *OR* ADHO MUKHA SVANASANA

A foundation pose that again any sequence is bound to feature. An energising and revitalising stretch for elongating the spine and strengthening hamstrings.



HIGH LUNGE *OR* UTTHITA ASHWA SANCHALANASANA

Sometimes referred to as 'crescent pose', this is a great starting point before transitioning into warrior sequences.



Illustrations, Getty Images

BUILD BETTER RELATIONSHIPS

According to Sara Niven, we all have the power within ourselves to improve our relationships with others

How do you get on with those around you – your partner, children, grandchildren, siblings, even your closest friends? Would you describe your relationships with these people as good in the main or do things often feel strained with definite room for improvement?

Although when we talk about relationships in general, romantic ones first tend to spring to mind, but our attachments and interactions with other people in our life can be similarly significant.

"Relationships are key to our health and happiness and give meaning and purpose to our lives," confirms chartered clinical psychologist and author Dr Jessamy Hibberd. "We're highly social beings and early humans needed to live together and get on in a group to ensure survival. This means we have a deep need for social inclusion and research shows that a lack of social support is as bad for you as smoking. Social isolation is associated with heightened risk of disease and early death, whereas warm and supportive relationships have long-term benefits for health and longevity."

If a relationship isn't going well, we may find ourselves harbouring feelings of anger, resentment, guilt or general sadness, depending on the situation and how it impacts on us. For a relationship that has seriously broken down, be this due to a betrayal, major disagreement or other factors such as drug or alcohol addiction, professional help may be the best option to try to work through it, either by seeing a counsellor alone or ideally in the form of couples or family therapy. Unfortunately though, even with the best will in the world, sometimes it can be healthier to walk away (easier with some types of relationships than others, of course).

The good news is that when it comes to the daily niggles and gripes everyone has or unhelpful patterns of communication we may have fallen into with our nearest and dearest, a lot can be done to improve matters. Here we look at five factors to bear in mind for better relationships.

WHEN TO SEEK PROFESSIONAL HELP

However hard one person tries, sometimes it's not enough to get a relationship back on track, and it can be worth seeking professional help if you want to try to salvage it.

"Every relationship has ups and downs, and arguments in themselves aren't necessarily a bad or unhealthy thing if they lead to issues being resolved," says Dee Holmes of Relate. "When something seems to be continually looping around however, and arguments become less about practicalities and more of a personal attack with insults and resentment building, that is a red flag warning sign. Counselling with a qualified couple or family therapist can provide a safe space, free from distractions for people to start to get to the bottom of what the real issues are and how to work through them. It ensures a discussion doesn't escalate into just another row and the counsellor can reflect back what they are seeing going on to help additionally."

To find out more about Relate and the services offered, visit www.relate.org.uk.

Lend an ear

Possibly one of the most powerful tools in the relationship improvements box, active listening is very different from sitting nodding, wondering when you will get your chance to speak or carry on with whatever it was that you were doing before. And it is the complete opposite of muttering 'Uh huh,' while browsing your phone as someone tries to tell you about their day.

"We have so many pressures, distractions and pulls on our attention that it can be difficult to be fully present even with those closest to us but ensuring someone feels heard and understood is really important," confirms Dr Hibberd, author of *The Imposter Cure*, (Octopus, £12.99).

Pointers for active listening include good eye contact (not staring intently, which can be intimidating), open body language (leaning towards the other person and avoiding crossed arms and legs), and an awareness of when to respond and when to stay quiet. It's important not to interrupt or immediately override someone's story with one of your own – 'You think that was a bad day, that's nothing – wait 'til you hear mine!'.

> "Active listening can take practice but is worth the effort"

Instead, when they finish speaking, try showing that you have been listening by summing up what they've been saying without judgement and with an invitation for them to continue. 'So, it sounds as though you felt disappointed today because you didn't get the feedback you were hoping and had worked hard for?'.

For something seemingly so simple, active listening can take practice (it is a learned skill when people train to become counsellors, for instance) but is definitely worth the effort in terms of the difference it can make in any kind of relationship.

A balancing act

Relationship expert, therapist and author Dr John Gottman extensively researched the secret of lasting, healthy relationships and noted that the couples with these clock up five positive interactions for every negative one. Dr Gottman even claimed to be able to predict the marriages heading for divorce based on this magic 5:1 ratio. "The bottom line: even though some level of negativity is necessary for a stable relationship, positivity is what nourishes your love," his website states.

An interaction can be as simple as a loving touch or gesture such as reaching for our partner's hand or simply an experience of being listened to attentively, as described previously. A negative one can include something neutral like failing to make a comment on something our partner shows us as well as dismissive or critical statements such as shrugging our shoulders to indicate we don't care or rolling our eyes sarcastically.

Dr Gottman stresses that couples need to regularly demonstrate appreciation and respect for one another, something that sometimes gets lost over time. Although his balance theory has been developed to apply specifically to couples, there may be lessons that can be taken on board for other relationships given that everyone has a need for appreciation and we can all be guilty of taking others for granted.

Make the time

Without quality time together, it's easy to lose touch with what's going on in someone else's life, even when we're living under the same roof. We also have less shared, positive experiences to cushion the difficult times or negative experiences, becoming ships that pass in the night, or even ships set on a clear collision course whenever the sea gets stormy!

"Quality time doesn't have to involve hours, it could be as little as half an hour or even ten minutes in some cases," explains family and couples counsellor Dee Holmes, who is a senior practice consultant for Relate. "It is about managing that time and keeping it free from distractions. If your partner or child wants your company or attention and you

CHILD'S PLAY

If you are a parent, building a healthy and trusting relationship with your child is probably one of the most important things you will ever do. No matter what age they are, you are effectively helping to shape another human being's self-esteem, and providing them with a good grounding for later life. "When you communicate well with your child, it leads to a strong relationship, greater cooperation, and feelings of worth," confirms therapist Zinny Perryman, who has specialised in working with children and family interventions. "If the opposite is the case, it can lead to your child switching off, conflict and feelings of worthlessness. They are far less likely to open up about any difficulties or worries and it can be easy to lose touch with what is going on for them." She advises:

1 Be as courteous to your child as you would a close friend. If you regularly interrupt them halfway through a story or break off to pay attention to something else, you are sending the message that what they have to say isn't important to you.

2 Unless other people are specifically meant to be included in discussions, hold important conversations with your children in private. Embarrassing them or putting them on the spot in front of others will lead to resentment and hostility in the future.

3 Avoid towering over younger children. Physically get down to their level to talk face to face.

4 Use 'door opener' statements like 'That's really interesting' or 'Tell me more about that' to encourage your children – or even your grandchildren – to share ideas and feelings and show you are interested and respect what they have to say. Your tone needs to be genuine and your focus on them.

5 If you are very angry about something, unless it is an emergency that needs addressing immediately, wait until you feel calmer and more objective. Address the behaviour rather than labelling the child – they may have done something you view as stupid or bad but they are not a stupid, bad child. Your child needs to feel accepted even if their behaviour isn't.

A FRIEND INDEED

A good friend is worth their weight in gold but when life is busy, how often do you manage a catch up? With some people boasting hundreds of 'friends' on Facebook, it can be all too easy for friendships to become more virtual than real. Perhaps you used to send cards but now it is much easier to post a quick 'Happy Birthday,' or you've been messaging a friend for months but neither of you have actually spoken on the phone for a year, let alone met up to see each other in person.

If this sounds familiar, it really can be worth making a little effort to bring a friendship back to (real) life. An unexpected phone call just to ask how they are, a card or ideally an arrangement to meet – that doesn't get postponed or cancelled so many times it never actually happens – can make all the difference, as will taking a genuine interest in what is going on in their life as opposed to only wanting to tell them about what is going on in yours.

You never know when you will need your friends so it is worth cultivating them and showing them how much they mean to you rather than leaving them feeling you only ever reach out in a crisis.

have no choice but to take an urgent call or dash off for an appointment then be honest and let them know when you will be available for them later. But it is a good idea to build in pockets of regular time for family members – perhaps you decide that for half an hour after your child comes home from school you will spend that time uninterrupted with them or when your partner gets back from work you make a habit of having a cup of tea together."

While quality time can involve watching TV or a film together, Holmes stresses that an important aspect is the togetherness of an activity rather than simply people's proximity.

"I see children walking to school glued to their phones like zombies when previously they would have been chatting to friends walking alongside them," she observes. "Similarly, families can often be in the same room, all on different devices without any communication and it is something we hear complaints about in the counselling room. It can be a good idea to set healthy boundaries regarding the use of social media, such as no phones at the dinner table or during a certain time of day. These boundaries will be different for each family."

Dr Hibberd agrees on the significance of time and how it is spent. "Having experiences together is important in relationships, whether that's something major or something as simple as sharing a meal or a joke."

Explanations and understanding

Have you ever experienced a situation where someone stomps around, slamming doors with a pained, angry expression on their face, leaving you unsure if you have upset them, and feeling it is best to stay out of the way? Later you discover they were stressed over something completely unrelated to you, or they thought they were sending out a clear message they were tired and needed help but you had no idea.

"When difficulties arise in a relationship, I often ask people if they have told those close to them how they feel and am often told they would expect that person to already know," explains Relate's Dee Holmes. "But we can't assume others, even those closest to us,

“We can’t assume others, even those closest to us, will be mind readers”

will be mind readers. They may interpret a situation completely differently or not have a clue you see something as a problem as it hasn’t been the case in a previous relationship. You can’t underestimate the power of explaining.”

She points out that it is also easy for miscommunication to arise when using text or WhatsApp, where there is no tone of voice or body language to help with communication. Saying that, there may be times when writing things down to start a dialogue can be useful in opening up lines of communication.

“For a situation in a family that continues to cause issues or arguments, you might suggest everyone writes down three things they feel would be helpful in resolving it and then sit and discuss them. Sometimes writing a letter to a partner, parent or friend could be a useful exercise if you find something very difficult to broach face to face or think they may not let you finish what you want to say.”

Role play

If you’ve ever noticed that your interactions with different people vary and they seem to bring out different sides of you, welcome to the world of Transactional Analysis, or TA.

This is a theory developed in the 1950s that is used by some therapists to help explain why we think, feel and behave the way we do, particularly when it comes to our relationships with others. Very simply put, the theory involves three sub personalities known as ego states – Parent, Adult and Child – that we regularly switch between (with some further divisions within these, such as Nurturing Parent and Critical Parent).

It explains that we take on different roles depending on who we are dealing with and how we feel at that time, and it can be easy to fall into unhelpful patterns and roles. Realising we are doing this provides the opportunity to shift gears into a response that can improve interactions and relationships.

For example, if you are regularly annoyed with your partner about not doing their share of household chores, it can be easy to assume the role of Critical Parent and come out with an angry, judgemental statement.

Switching into our rational Adult ego state means we might say something like ‘I feel I’ve been doing most of the chores this week and am really tired. I know you’re working hard too but I’d appreciate help tonight’.

This invites the other person to (hopefully) respond as an adult as opposed to taking on the role of sulky child or becoming critical themselves and telling you all the things they feel you haven’t done that week, with the risk of the conversation escalating into a row.

Our relationships, whether with relatives, partners, children, friends or colleagues, are wonderful things and enrich our lives. By being more aware of them, we should all get more out of our own relationships.

Images: All Getty Images

LEARNING HOW TO LET GO

Retirement may require you to let go of some goals or desires. Appreciating what you have can help you keep things in perspective, explains Olly Tew

'Will retirement 'go away' if I put off thinking about it?' This is a very human response to pretend that something that we can't avoid – and are powerless to stop – is not happening, whether that is the breakdown of a relationship, realising that an investment has failed, or knowing that your car has had too many problems recently, and needs to be traded in. This can be just as true with feelings about retirement: you feel unable to avoid the issue, but confronting the feelings can feel like a little bit more effort than you have right now, so you push the thoughts to the back of your mind, and follow this up by not making plans for your retirement.

This can be either in a workplace (where you don't discuss with your company how they will cope with your absence) or it can be simply not thinking about what will happen to you at this next stage of your life. This can be described as a form of denial, although you are aware retirement probably won't go away if you ignore it for long enough.

Any form of denial is not a long-term solution. And like any other inevitability, time can't be postponed; eventually you will accept retirement, or retirement will accept you. Before you can begin to work through these emotions, which may feel unpleasant, you need to accept the fact that they are there. It might be a good idea to try our first mindfulness activity on p95 ('#1: Face Your Fears'), which aims to help you explore the true feelings you have towards retirement, and which you may have been denying, or otherwise burying beneath other thoughts. Once you're aware of the type of feelings you have, then you can start to confront them (and possibly reject them). It's always better to examine the way you're feeling rather than deny it – apart from any other reason, with a bit of inspection and consideration, those feelings may actually be unfounded fears rather than a true reflection of what retirement will be like.

RETIREMENT MEANS ‘LETTING GO’

The expression you might hear more than any other with regards to leaving work and entering full retirement is ‘letting go’. You may be told that you need to ‘let go’ of your work, your concerns, or your worries about the place you’re employed. The expression sounds so worryingly easy, because letting go of any literal object is very simple. In reality, ‘letting go’ of your work life is very complicated and may take a lot of effort. Prior to retiring, you may have reached a position of considerable influence or expertise at your company, possibly even authority. This position, and the responsibilities that come with it, are often intrinsically linked to how you see yourself, and ‘letting go’ of that aspect of your life might feel as easy as ‘letting go’ of a member of your family who passes away. Some experts even see retirement as a source of bereavement feelings. In any case, the words ‘letting go’ are wholly inadequate to describe what you are being asked to do.

Letting go of the role you used to have may not be simple, but the route towards it may be similar for most of us. It involves seeing ourselves in a different light, with our work as slightly more distant to who we are. Rather than being ‘a retired maths teacher’, you should try to see yourself as ‘someone who used to teach maths’. The difference might not seem extreme, but it is important. Both mental images mean the same thing, but the first one implies a loss of function in society, whereas the second only describes a change in circumstance. Rather than continue to define yourself by what you used to do, instead begin to think about what you would like to do with this next stage of your life.

Work goals not met

One aspect of retirement that not many people discuss is the stage in your career that you have reached when you do. For many people, that stage might fall short of where they saw themselves as younger people (or potentially, their career may exceed what they expected to ‘make’ of themselves). For people who feel they haven’t lived to their full potential, retirement may feel like a bitter reward that they haven’t earned, or a reminder that they weren’t able to achieve the goals they set for themselves. This can be a challenge, and it is important to try to see your life from a broader perspective viewpoint. It is likely, for example, that the reason you weren’t able to complete all of your work goals was related to other aspects of your life. Making sacrifices at work to spend time with your family, care for loved ones, or plan for any future outside of where you worked are both very human, and likely the right choices to make. Even when making those choices at the time, it probably occurred to you that the choice would affect your future, but those particular choices were what felt right to you at the time. Whether or not those choices paid off in the way you hoped is not really relevant here, what is important is that there was a good reason for you to put something ahead of your work goals, and resenting that fact in any

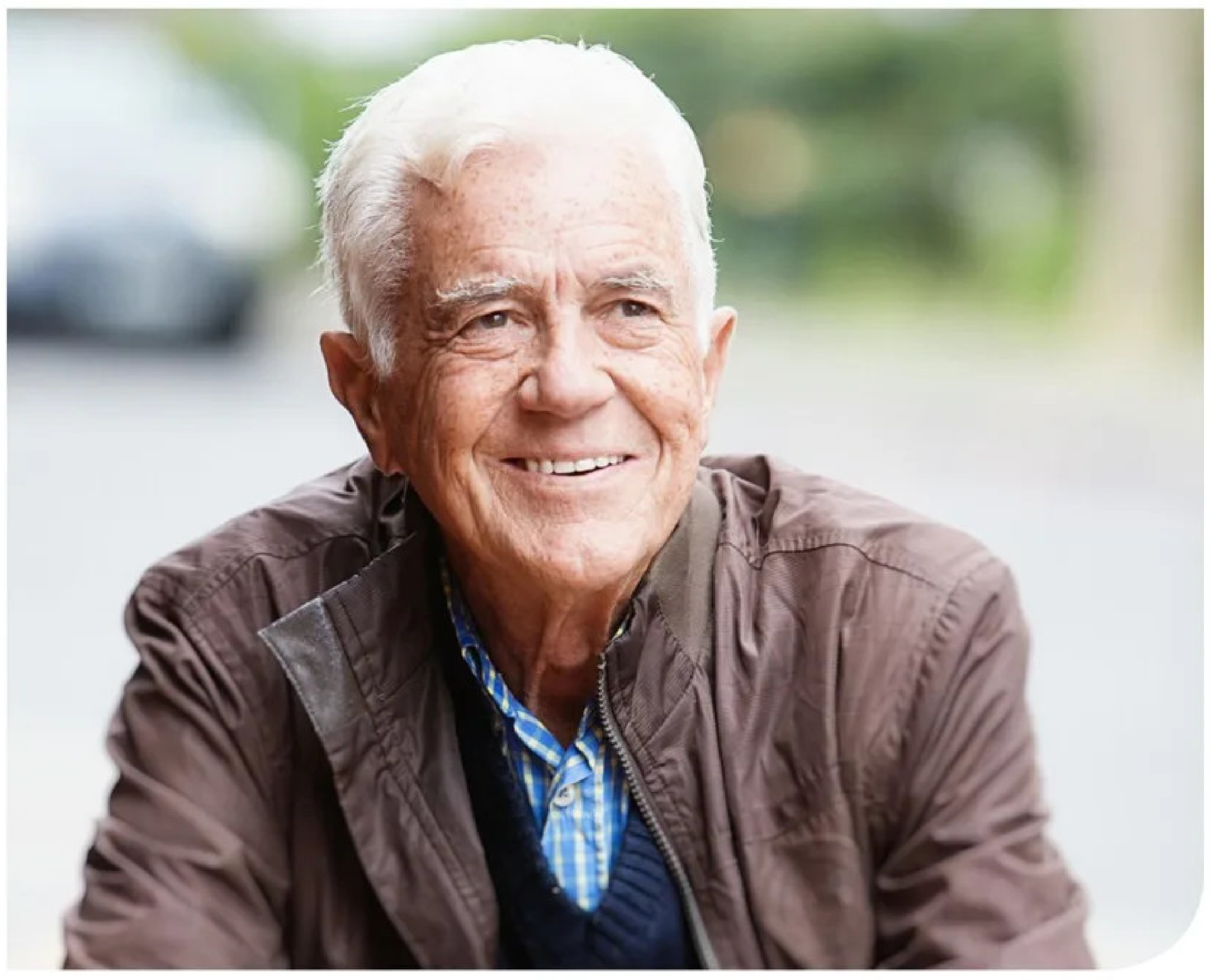
way won't change the outcome. It is far healthier to look at your life from that wider perspective, and see the achievements and life experiences that you have enjoyed.

The material things we want

One of the advantages of getting older and moving up the employment ladder is that there is often more disposable income to hand. This brings the opportunities that money provides, such as larger properties, more expensive holidays, or flashier cars. Reaching retirement may also mean either a scaling down of your living standards, or recognising that you have reached the peak of comfort that you can attain. In earlier periods of your life, you were able to imagine and plan for the comforts that promotion and savings could afford you, but now you need to accept that your lifestyle isn't likely to become more comfortable than you are currently used to. This can be a challenge, but it is worth reflecting that the things we have achieved and the standards we currently enjoy are far greater than what our parents or grandparents' generations could enjoy at the same period of life. Whatever your living situation is, there are many people who couldn't imagine having the life and comfort that you have. It's always better to be grateful for what we have, rather than resent the things we don't.

The physical goals we aspire to

Another inevitable part of time is the effect on our bodies. No matter how healthy we are, or how active a lifestyle we lead, there will come a point where age does impact what we are physically able to do. This can feel like an unhappy aspect of retirement, particularly if you have always wanted to be a more physically active person, but have not had the free time before now. There might come a point where you



#1: FACE YOUR FEARS

Identify your true worries about retirement

Over the following pages, you'll notice four exercises to help you find perspective and appreciation for your life. For the first of our mindful activities, get into your mindfulness state, however you choose to do that. Breathe deeply. Allow your mind to relax, and identify any intrusive thoughts, before sending them away. After a few minutes, begin to start thinking about your retirement. Identify the first thought that comes, and whether that is a positive or negative one. If positive, release it. When you catch a negative thought, examine it. Does it relate to any loss in responsibility, or influence? Are you worried about what you'll do with your time? Whatever the thought is make a mental note, then release it. Don't become too focused on any one thought – all you are trying to do with this exercise is identify any fears or misgivings about this new stage in your life. It is important that you only allow your mind to touch a thought briefly without linking the next in the train. Once you have identified all of your fears about retirement, run through them again. Once you have narrowed down your negative thoughts about retirement, make a physical note of them. Keep any that relate to 'not achieving my full potential' to one side, for the next exercise.

realise you can no longer run a marathon, or climb Mount Everest, and you feel that you have reached the summit of the physical achievements that you will make. This feeling is not accurate, however. No matter your physical condition, there is a lot of the world that you can see. You might not be able to climb Everest, but you may be able to walk Snowdon, or see the quiet beauty of the Lake District. Running a marathon may be beyond your knees, but you can possibly jog a fun run, or do a long-distance bike ride! Rather than giving in to unhappiness about not achieving a physical goal, why not simply move the goal-posts? In almost all situations, a compromise is better than completely giving up.

How to truly let go

There are some things that the last few paragraphs should have helped you understand. First, that for many people the idea of retiring and beginning the new stage of their lives is almost too scary to think about, and they may prefer to live in a state of denial. Second, the idea of 'letting things go' is far easier said than done, and involves some introspection to figure out exactly what it is we might be avoiding thinking about. Finally, the number of desires or goals that we have to 'let go' of is probably a bigger amount than we believed we carried, and they are probably in more than one area of our pre-retirement lives.

There are legitimate reasons for feeling unhappy or even fearful about the fact you may be retiring, especially if you no longer feel you are able to achieve the kind of goals or ambitions that you once had. There are several ways in which you can counter these feelings. First is to 'let go' of the more fanciful or unachievable goals or dreams that you may have had. For example, you might not be able to build a house with your own two hands, an ambitious goal that some of us have, but one which even the younger and more fit of us would have serious difficulties fulfilling. A technique that can help with this is to consciously readjust your goals, in order to better fit your current circumstances. This should be done with careful reflection, and using a mindful state can help you approach this change in goals without emotional influences.

Let's stay with the dream of building your own house, an admittedly extreme example, but one which can represent any dream you have that you feel is beyond you at your age. As a younger person, you may have imagined buying the land, deciding how many rooms, and the way in which they fit together, and then beginning construction. This is, naturally, a very ambitious project, and you may now feel that you are too old to be able to do it in the way in which you envisaged. The dream of literally building your own house may have to be let go, but the underlying desire of designing your own home doesn't need to be abandoned in any way, shape of form. If you have the resources, you can still buy the land, hire a construction firm and an architect, and you will still be able to 'build your own house', albeit more figuratively than literally. If your resources are more limited, you may instead either buy a home to invest your time in restoring, or restore your own home in either large (refitting the kitchen) or small (painting the living room) ways. All of these aims fall under the same core desire of putting

> “Appreciating what we have is a skill many have, but are not in the habit of practising”

what is in your head into the place that you live, making it feel truly yours. If you want to practise this type of technique through mindfulness see our exercise on p99 – ‘#3: Be Realistic’.

So, we have covered a couple of techniques that help with dealing with these negative feelings, either by letting go of unachievable desires, or by altering them so as to fit in with our current circumstances. The final, and most important one, is to focus on appreciating what we have. This is a skill that many of us have, but are not in the habit of practising, and using mindfulness techniques, we can change that.

THE LOST ART OF APPRECIATION

For many of us, the idea of ‘appreciating what we have’ provokes a negative feeling because it implies that we are either ungrateful for what we have, or worse, take it for granted. No one likes to imagine themselves as a selfish or entitled person, and any suggestion that we make the effort to try to take stock of what we have may actually make us feel defensive or angry. However, there isn’t anything to feel ashamed about. When something is a constant in your life, it can be very easy to assume it will always be there, and it’s human nature to not examine the possibility that it won’t be in the future, which is often the underlying fear attached to appreciation (and the reason we neglect practising it). But, like the earlier example that retirement can’t be ignored indefinitely, we also shouldn’t put off appreciating what we have until it is too late. One of the more accurate sayings in the English language is ‘you don’t know what you’ve got until its gone’, and that is very closely tied to the idea of appreciating what you have. It can be as true for perfectly mundane things as well as life-changing events, for example, you often don’t appreciate how good it feels to not feel sick until the moment you

#2: CONSIDER YOUR AIMS

Letting go of the less achievable goals

First, take the list of thoughts that you identified as ‘not achieving my full potential’ from the first exercise and examine them. Separate them into two categories, the first being ‘things I won’t ever be able to do’ and ‘things I might not be able to do in this way’. Keep the second list separate for Exercise #3.

Look at your list of items under ‘things I won’t ever be able to do’. Hopefully there aren’t too many. Are there any that, with a small amount of adjustment, belong in the second list? If so, consider moving them over.

For each of the items that can’t be moved over, hold the thought loosely in your mind. Perhaps visualise holding it on a scrap of paper on a windy day. This is a goal that feels very important to you, and which you don’t feel you can do. Consider that not completing this goal does not have an impact on who you are as a person.

Yesterday you may have still harboured ideas of doing this thing one day, but now you don’t think that is the case. The person you are between yesterday and today has not actually changed in any physical or mental way. The only thing that has happened is you have decided not to follow this specific goal. There are many other things that you can do, and which are more worthwhile you giving your energies to. As with all mindfulness exercises try not to allow any emotions into this thought process, remain neutral. Then let the scrap of paper go, and watch the old goal float away on the wind.

catch a cold, or how warm your house is in the winter until the moment you forget to turn the boiler on. Using mindfulness, appreciating what you have does not need to be tied to an intense emotional feeling, but instead it is simply a way of re-adjusting your perspective, to allow you to more easily 'let go' of the desires or dreams that may be beyond you. Consider each of these below while also maintaining a state of mindfulness.

Health

As briefly mentioned above, all of us take our health for granted. Even when we live with some restrictions from age or disability, we can fall into the trap of getting comfortable with how we feel on a day-to-day basis. It is an outlook we've been practising for our entire lives. For example, we may notice at the age of 30 that we have less energy than we did at age 20, and at age 40 that we have less energy than age 30, but it's far less likely that we ever appreciated the energy we had at ages 20 and 30 while we were still 20 and 30. This way of thinking is almost universal, and applies to everything related to our bodies: we only really think about how well our bodies perform once they are not able to perform to the same level any more. This is, you may agree, a very dispiriting way to view your own body, because it means that whenever you really think about yourself, you are accustomed to feeling disappointed in what your body can do, because you've been doing it for your whole life.

For this reason, it's a good idea to practise appreciation by taking a few minutes each day to think about what your body can do right now and be thankful for it – how far can you walk, how much energy do you have for playing with younger family members, how easy is it for you to get out of bed in the morning? While they seem like small achievements, there may be a point in a few years' time when even these activities may feel beyond you, or take considerably more effort. Rather than bemoan the loss of what you could do, feel gratitude for and appreciate the things that you can do.

Family and friends

Depending on your own circumstances, appreciating your family and friends can be quite a lot of work, particularly if they are ever a source of stress, and especially if they are a source of stress on a daily basis. Hopefully, the relationship between you and each of your friends and family members is already a positive one, or if not then you are at least on speaking terms. If it isn't, then you should consider whether this is something you want to improve. Time is a resource that nearly everyone thinks they have lots of, but which often runs out faster than we imagine. It's important that we do not wait too long before healing any deep rifts in our lives.

Even relationships that don't need any repairs or maintenance are at risk of being underappreciated, and it is often the case that the people we love the most are also the ones that could be most easily taken for granted. As with our health above, it isn't due to being selfish people, it is simply that we don't often consider what we have in our lives before it is gone. For this reason, more than any other, it is

important to take the time to think about the friends and family you have, and what they mean to you. Sometimes we put this off because we don't want to consider what our lives will be like without them, and sometimes it's because we don't want to feel guilty if we haven't spent as much time with them as we feel we should have. Whatever the reason, think about the people who have so much to do with what makes you who you are. You may feel inspired to make more of an effort to see them and enjoy their company, or feel more charitable if a rift needs repairing. In any case, you will feel more appreciation for what you have in life when you start with the people who mean a lot to you.

Homes and pets

Whatever your living situation, if you have a place to call your own then you are already very fortunate, and even more so if you have a pet or two to share it with. Animals are excellent companions, and having one in your life helps add structure as you care for them (and in the case of dogs, regular exercise is also included). There are also many animals that really need someone with time to care for them, and they can be found at rescues or shelters. If your home is feeling a little empty of sound or action, then you should definitely consider getting a pet. While you're considering this, take a look around your home right now.

Appreciating your home can take some effort, for the simple reason that you are not used to considering what life would be like somewhere else. One easy way is to decide whether it needs some love; even repainting the walls can give you a renewed appreciation for the comfort your home brings. Any other refurbishment projects will likely bring feelings of pride and accomplishment for your home also. Otherwise, simply walking around the house and thinking about the events that have happened in each room over time can bring back a lot of memories, and hopefully most of them are pleasant.

Think about how different your life would be if you didn't regularly have somewhere to rest and be at peace with the world: your own personal Shangri-La. Consider the technologies available to your home that wouldn't have been imagined even 30 years ago, when your parents and grandparents reached this stage of their lives. In comparison, your home is full of luxuries to be thankful for.

#3: BE REALISTIC

Readjusting your goals to your current situation

Look back at the list you made in the second exercise entitled 'things I might not be able to do in this way'. Once you have regained your mindful state, take the first item on the list and just hold it in your mind. Recognise that it's unlikely you'll be able to complete this goal or desire currently but start to think about ways in which you can alter the goal to make it more achievable. That might be by reducing the scale of the goal (for example, rather than travelling the world on a motorbike, perhaps travelling Europe in a mobile home?). It also might be done by extending your timescale (perhaps rather than running a marathon you could walk one instead?).

It might even be as simple as rather than completing a goal yourself, making it easier for others to complete the goal (such as fundraising for another person to climb Mount Everest, rather than climbing it yourself). There are plenty of ways that you can make any goal that feels a bit too big as it is currently more achievable, and more suitable with your circumstances. It would be worthwhile reading the 'Finding Purpose' article in this bookazine to see whether changing an old ambition could help provide a new sense of purpose as you tackle the spirit of that goal during your retirement.

Memories and life experiences

Possibly the easiest thing that we can take for granted are our own life stories. No one else in the history of the planet has the same story as you, or ever will have. The places you have been, the people you've met, and the things you have done will only ever be that exact way for one single person – you. It's because you know this to be an undisputed fact that you are less likely to examine your own history, and appreciate the events that happened to you, and you alone. If you have lived a life filled with love, dependable friendship and happy experiences then you owe it to yourself to reflect on this regularly. We can only hope that any negative memories are vastly outweighed by the positive ones, but this unfortunately won't be the case for everyone.

If you find yourself in this category then it would probably be best to only think about the most positive experiences and memories that you have, although there is something else that you can feel proud of. If you have had a life that hasn't been easy, had great personal struggles that almost stopped you trying, or weren't given the opportunities that others had, then that makes all of the achievements that you have accomplished over the years all the sweeter. If nothing else then you can know that, whether because of the tough experiences, or in spite of them, you overcame them and survived, which many other people couldn't manage. The bottom line is that you should feel proud of who you are, whatever your circumstances.

MINDFULNESS, LETTING GO AND APPRECIATION

Achieving a mindful state of mind can help us with removing our unachievable goals and appreciating what we are capable of still doing, and what we have. Being in a calm, meditative state allows us to explore situations and goals, to see if they are as unworkable/unachievable as we think, and if they are, then to allow us to let them go with as limited emotional response as possible. This can be done by taking an unemotional state of mind, holding our previous desires up, and gently letting them go, much as we let intrusive thoughts go using visualisation. Replacing these desires with those that are more workable can also be a thought exercise (see exercise '#3: Be Realistic'). As the Buddhist Monk Ajahn Chah said: "if you let go a little, you will have a little happiness. If you let go a lot, you will have a lot of happiness".

It can also help to reflect on the things that you have (family, friends, health, home, experiences etc) when in a state of mindfulness. This concept may seem surprisingly challenging, as using mindfulness as a tool aims to counter negative emotional responses with objective truths. Rather than feeling unhappy about not achieving a dream to buy a new car, it allows you to reflect (and be thankful for) the opportunities you already have, be that a car that still works, any form of public transport, and the fact that you can still use your own motor power to move about. In this one instance, you're using mindfulness to counter a negative emotional feeling with an objective truth that also includes positive feelings as associated with it. While mindfulness generally aims to look at the world with a neutral perspective, on this occasion it's okay to let your perspective drift to a more positive one. Bear this in mind when you try any of the mindfulness exercises throughout this article.

#4: GIVE IN TO THE LOVE!

Show appreciation for what you have

This is a very simple exercise, and you should take time to do this each day. Make the usual preparations for getting into a mindful state, such as moving to somewhere quiet and comfortable. Breathe deeply, close your eyes. This time take maybe five minutes to sink into the state of mindfulness, and continue to gently identify and dismiss any intrusive thoughts. When you're ready, picture yourself. You don't have to be doing anything, but just hold a representation of who you are. What you are going to do now is focus on a single thing that you appreciate, that you know makes you feel good. It can be anything in the world, a good joke, the taste of a dessert, somebody's smile. Something that gives you a warm feeling. Now, imagine drawing a line from that single thing to the representation of yourself, as if tying it to yourself with a length of string. Then, just think about it. Imagine that one thing surprising you on a bad day, and how much better you feel for it. Think about how lucky you are to be able to enjoy that one thing whenever you see it. When you move out of the mindfulness state, make a note of that thing you imagined. Tomorrow, when you do the same exercise, the representation of you will already have one thing tied to it, and now you need to think of another special thing that makes you happy. Again, it doesn't need to be at all complicated. When you come out of the mindful state tomorrow, you will now have two things on your list. Keep doing this for at least a couple of weeks, and see how it changes the way you feel about the things you might have taken for granted.

Images: All Getty Images

REAL-LIFE CLUTTER

Jennifer Morgan on how to control mess

Ahhh, quick! The kids have just rung to announce their imminent arrival. You survey the scene; your home looks like a tornado has struck. There's a mountain of post and paperwork swamping the kitchen table and abandoned shoes strewn across the hallway. You're pretty sure it was tidy not that long ago... wasn't it?

Time to take action. You open the hall cupboard and throw offending shoes, bags and coats in, pile up the carnage of the coffee table and pop one of your interiors books on top, then gather up as much as you can and redeploy to the spare room, closing the door quickly behind you. With a few minutes to spare, you plump up the sofa cushions and successfully retrieve the TV remote from its new home in the dog's bed. If they don't go in the kitchen, you might get away with it.

But what if you can't go on like this? Perhaps the above has finally tipped you over the edge, or maybe there's been a change in life circumstance. As Vicky Silverthorn, author of *Start With Your Sock Drawer*, explains, "Clutter is like one giant to-do list of stuff constantly surrounding you in a place that should make you feel calm, relaxed and in control." But it's important not to get overwhelmed. "This fear of it all being too much is one of the reasons people don't get started," she explains. "I always say, 'start small' with a corner, cupboard or drawer, and stop yourself from continuing unless you know you have a little more energy and time to spare."

Helen Sanderson, professional organiser and coach (**helensanderson.com**), agrees. "Clutter is a pile of decisions that have not been made; things that have been put off until tomorrow, avoided and stepped over until they build up. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with stuff, but clutter becomes an issue in our homes when it starts to impact on you practically or emotionally." Cue the children's arrival.

Your home reflects your state of mind, too. A well-organised household that never loses the keys, never forgets a birthday and knows where important paperwork lives makes you operate better. "Feeling ashamed of your home is often a symptom of low self-esteem," says Helen, "but you can use taking care of your home as a way of learning to nurture yourself."

Getting rid of stuff can be liberating and change the way you look at future purchases. Helen believes it gives us a new energy or 'lust for life'. People tell her they feel a surge of power and, often, significant things start to shift in other areas – relationships improve and possibilities open up.

But what's causing this clutter in our homes? Lots, Vicky believes, is a result of our attitude to buying. "My home is far from empty, but I consider myself to be pretty minimal in many ways," she says. "I don't shop for stuff frequently, getting

WHICH KIND OF CLUTTERER ARE YOU?

Vicky Silverthorn (youneedavicky.com) breaks down the six kinds of clutterer

THE STORER
You pay more to keep things in storage than what they're actually worth

THE SHOVER
You've run out of space because you're storing things you don't need

THE FORGETTER
You live by the mantra 'out of sight, out of mind' and have a secret 'messy' cupboard

THE STACKER
Paperwork, books, dirty dishes... If it's neat, then it isn't clutter. Right?

THE BLITZER
You leave things to build up for months before doing a big clear out

THE BLINKERED
Your clutter has been around for so long that it almost feel like it's part of the furniture

paid and then spending it online isn't my thing, and I avoid gimmicky sales like the plague. When you shop mindfully, it feels great. To me, a treat is an experience, not an object."

Helen agrees: "Some of us have a hunter-gatherer instinct and live to collect things, which was fine when we gathered berries for dinner, but not when you have to have every single kitchen appliance or gadget, many of which you rarely or never use. Filling yourself with something from the outside will never fill your soul with happiness – we all know that, don't we?"

You might feel that buying tons of storage is essential for your decluttering journey, but Nicola Lewis of **thisgirlcanorganise.com** believes this is where many of us go wrong early on. "You need to eliminate the excess first," she explains. "This will give you more room for the things you do use in your home, showcasing the items that make you smile. How many bath towels do you really need?" she laughs. "A family of four needs 16 max! Give the rest to local dog shelters."

Many of us have insufficient storage space or haven't made the most of what is available. "The key to maintaining a tidy home is to put things away," says Helen, who's just launched her own Home Declutter Kit, "but if you don't have a place for them to go, then it becomes very hard." Being attached to things is normal, but it becomes a problem if it's taking over whole rooms. "You might feel that you're dishonouring the person or memory you have associated with certain things, which is really important to address," Helen adds.

Likewise, Nicola is a great believer in making lists, crossing off clutter hotspots as and when you tackle them and focusing on what's important to you. She also follows a donate, keep, bin method when sorting stuff. Vicky suggests hanging a carrier bag on a door handle as a place to discard things rather than putting them back where they came from.

There's no fast and furious solution to decluttering. Small wins are what give you the incentive to continue (but not too small – Helen recommends a day, or at least a few hours, so you make a real impact, rather than just papering over the cracks). Perhaps when the children next visit, you'll be able to let them into the kitchen…

5 STEPS TO A CLUTTER FREE HOME

1 START BY SETTING GOALS
A deadline like a family event or overnight guest is useful. Being minimalist isn't about creating an empty home, it's about having space for what you need as well as great behind-the-scenes storage.

2 MAKE TIME
Put aside dedicated decluttering time and try not to get distracted. Choosing jobs you know you will complete in the timescale will give you that much-needed sense of achievement.

3 GET HELP
Whether you turn to a decluttering expert or family and friends, seeking help will give you someone to turn to when the going gets tough.

4 SHOPPING
Be a considered shopper in every area. Be strict with new purchases, ask for things you want as gifts and reinvent or upcycle old belongings.

5 SAY GOODBYE
Complete the journey and take things to the tip, charity shop or friends (check with them first). Making a pile in the garage doesn't count!

"Clutter is like one giant to-do list of stuff constantly surrounding you"

Image: Getty Images

SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING NEW

Sarah Gane goes beyond 'shabby chic' to look at why there has never been a better time to start upcycling

It's no secret we're in a climate emergency. The way we consume things like fashion, food and homewares is unsustainable. According to research by the Reuse Network (reuse-network.org.uk), ten million household items are sent to landfill every single year. But what if we were to do things a little differently and learn to love our things for longer?

Upcycling is not a new concept in itself. Taking something that has seen better days and giving it a new lease of life has long been used by people as a creative way of making do or making something completely unique. For Elizabeth Morris (**www.elizabethdotdesign.com**), it was something she was aware of from a young age: "Throughout my childhood, my mum was often updating items around the house, repurposing furniture we already owned. I loved getting involved, choosing items from auctions to paint for my bedroom. It's something I've always enjoyed, so when it came to furnishing my own home, I naturally went looking for items to upcycle."

This approach went on to have unexpected benefits, as she explains: "I realised that so many people want to fill their homes with unique furniture, but don't have the time or tools to do so – that's where my business began." She launched Elizabeth Dot Design and sells beautiful upcycled furniture through her Etsy store (**etsy.com/shop/elizabethdotdesign**).

Fix up, look sharp

"What I love most about upcycling is seeing a tired piece of furniture transformed to fit within a modern home," says Elizabeth. "I specialise in mid-century pieces, which often look amazing without any paintwork, so I prefer to seek out the pieces that are damaged, stained or broken. I really enjoy the process of fixing these well-built, solid items that have years of use left in them. The paint finish is the final step – I often use bold, graphic designs to hide any imperfections I've fixed, and ensure any salvageable wood grain is highlighted."

Former PR manager Stacy (**tillyandsage.co.uk**), also started out upcycling as a hobby, making presents for people, before it evolved into a full-time business. "I've always had a creative streak and enjoyed making things... I'd been painting wooden gifts for friends and family when I saw an empty milk bottle in the kitchen at work and I thought I'd try painting that."

The results were really positive, as she explains: "When I posted a picture of it on Facebook I was inundated with requests to make more. That was just over four years ago, and I've run Tilly and Sage full time ever since." For Stacy, it's the creative challenge and satisfaction of the end result that is so appealing: "I just love turning someone's 'rubbish' into quirky items for the home and saving another item from getting sent to landfill."

So far she's rescued everything from jars to old gin bottles: "I've recently started making soap dispensers out of [them]. All my friends and family save them for me... some of the bottles are gorgeous, far too nice to throw away. Instead I upcycle them so that people can get enjoyment for years to come."

But her most popular item so far is the festive 'cars in jars'. "These came about because I had some old Matchbox cars that I didn't want to part with. I transformed them into Christmas ornaments and they're a big hit every year. I love scouring vintage fairs and car boot sales looking for the cars!"

Look to the past

Vintage items are also used as a starting point for Suzanne Whitelock's stationery projects. Her business, Pulp Paper Heaven (**etsy.com/shop/PulpPaperHeaven**), specialises in beautiful handmade notebooks, each one made by reusing original prints

Image: Elizabeth Morris

saved from the pulping machine. "I've [always been] drawn to past times," Suzanne tells us. "Glamorous movie stars from the '30s, the shapes of fashions from the '20s to the '50s, furniture, household items, sewing patterns, and books and magazines."

As a child, Suzanne used her pocket money to buy treasures from markets, jumble sales and charity shops: "I love the colour and illustration quality of a lot of vintage print. An old book can have a magical air when you think of the many hands that made it and have read it! They inspire me beyond what is written."

Much like Elizabeth, Suzanne also prefers working with damaged items.

"The books and prints I use for binding are worn, torn and crumbly – or, as I like to think, 'overloved'. I can't help imagining all the previous owners, especially when I find interesting inscriptions, recipes, photos or postcards tucked inside." Treasures like this also make their way into her designs: "These get bound back in as part of the new notebook. It's important to keep these snippets of time and people's lives as integral to the book. We all follow our own path, but we criss-cross each other as we go."

How to get started

Feeling inspired and thinking of tackling a new upcycling project, but not quite sure where's best to start? "My main tip would be to be brave and give it a go," explains Stacy. "The best thing about upcycling is that your initial costs are very low, so you can experiment with different ideas without worrying about things going wrong and losing too much money."

Whether it's reimagining a new use for an existing item – refashioning old fabric into cushions or clothes for example – anything is possible. Having the freedom to experiment is key. If you're keen on sewing, curtains or bedsheets could become pyjama bottoms, dresses or even a den for the grandchildren.

Happy accidents can produce the most fun projects too. That wool scarf or jumper you shrunk in the wash by mistake? You can turn it into a cushion cover! Simply sew the front and back together with a corresponding yarn colour and fill it with a cushion inner. With straightforward projects like these, you'll slowly but surely gather enough unique creations to make your home your own and learn as you go.

What's more, by upcycling furniture, you essentially give a whole room a completely new look for the price of some basic supplies, tools, paint and a bit of spare time. Spending a good chunk of that on prep work will give you a lasting finish, as Elizabeth tells us: "I'm guilty of wanting to see instant results, but I've learnt that preparation is vital if you want the paintwork to last. Give yourself enough time to thoroughly sand, clean

> "The best thing about upcycling is that your initial costs are very low, so you can experiment with different ideas"

and prime before painting. It might be tempting to go straight for the paint tin, but if you don't prep then the paintwork will quickly get chipped and damaged."

If you have no room for more furniture, "work with items you love or have some meaning for you," says Suzanne. "It will show in the end result. Practise technique and keep developing new ideas, and you will come up with your personal way of creating that is unique to you."

Outside of this, there are plenty of websites, magazines and inspirational classes to give you some ideas and motivation to get started.

KILNER
EST 1842
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BEYOND UPCYCLING: WAYS YOU CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

1 REUSE

Donating unwanted furniture and electronics to worthy causes such as Reuse Network helps to reduce poverty, cut waste and tackle social exclusion. This organisation alone has helped more than 1.55 million families, saving a whopping 129,250 tons of CO2. Use its fun online calculator to work out how much your unwanted items could help people and the environment.

reuse-network.org.uk

2 REPAIR

'Move slow and fix things' says The Restart Project.
This organisation helps people learn how to repair broken electronics, as well as rethink how they consume them in the first place.

therestartproject.org

3 RECYCLE

Is your item beyond repair? Sites such as RecycleNow or, for those in the US, the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), provide some great tips and advice on how to recycle items safely, helping the environment.

recyclenow.com/epa.gov/recycle

Images: Suzanne Whitelock (notebook), Stacy O'Briens (jar), Getty Images

MAKE YOUR HOUSE A HOME WITH PLANTS

Jennifer Morgan explores the many style points and wellbeing benefits to filling your home with greenery

Our homes are becoming greener and not just from an eco perspective. Flick through your favourite interior design magazines and you'll see spider plants hanging above baths, cheese plants given quirky names, and carefully curated collections of succulents. But these plants aren't just there for picture-perfect moments.

"Our lives are becoming faster; we want (and get) instant gratification for the things we do online," says Judith de Graaff of **urbanjunglebloggers.com** and co-author of *Urban Jungle: Living & Styling with Plants* (Callwey Verlag, £19.49/$22.25). "But taking care of our houseplants keeps us grounded and slows us down, too. We learn patience because plants don't grow a new flower in seconds, taking weeks or even months to bloom or grow a new leaf."

Instagrammer Mimi Jenkins of **instagram.com/plantlovinghome** believes there's something about having living greenery within the house: "It just gives you a feel-good factor, especially when not much plant life is surviving outside." Houseplants are a great way of bringing the outdoors in when it's dreary weather – the very opposite of how we strive to take the indoors out during summer months.

"I always think a home looks much more alive and lived-in with plants," agrees Claire Bishop, houseplants buyer at Dobbies. "The craze for houseplants has a lot to do with social media, with stylists and homeowners using them in lifestyle images. But we are also more conscious of the effects plants can have on your environment and mental wellbeing."

The benefits

"Many indoor plants have air-purifying abilities, helping cleanse the air we breathe from various toxins, releasing fresh oxygen and making our living environment healthier," explains Judith. "With more oxygen we can concentrate, relax and sleep better. Taking care of our houseplants is also relaxing: watering, pruning, feeding and checking up on them from time to time slows us down." When Judith started her global community for plant lovers, Urban Jungle Bloggers, in 2013, houseplants were "hip and happening," she recalls. "Slowly but surely, they have become mainstream. There are very few homes, cafés or restaurants without plants. They're more widely available to buy, too, with lots of new plant shops opening and many interiors brands designing their own ranges of plant pots and botanical products, adding a much-needed touch of nature to any home."

But what about the not-so-green-fingered among us? "It's all about providing the correct conditions for your plant," says Judith. "Light, water, humidity, temperature, soil type and drainage are most important. The majority of common houseplants thrive in bright, indirect light, which means they should be close to a window." Perfect for those extended kitchen-diners many of us have.

"Most succulents and cacti need direct sunlight and appreciate a sunny windowsill, while the Sansevieria, Dracaena or Pothos can do with shadier areas," adds Judith. "My favourite plants are cacti and palm trees – the bigger the better. Cacti come in so many shapes and colours that they fascinate me, while I love palm trees for their tropical vibe and because it's fun (and simple) to grow them from seed. Plants like Aloe or the

peace lily are also very easy and don't require much skill."

"I always feed my plants from March to September," Claire advises, "which is the traditional growing season. This helps with strength of new growth and flower production. I also lift the plant pot out of its planter to water, so the roots aren't left sitting in wet conditions as this can cause them to rot. The most common problem is too much love – overwatering. Many of the on-trend plants at the moment thrive on neglect!" Music to our ears!

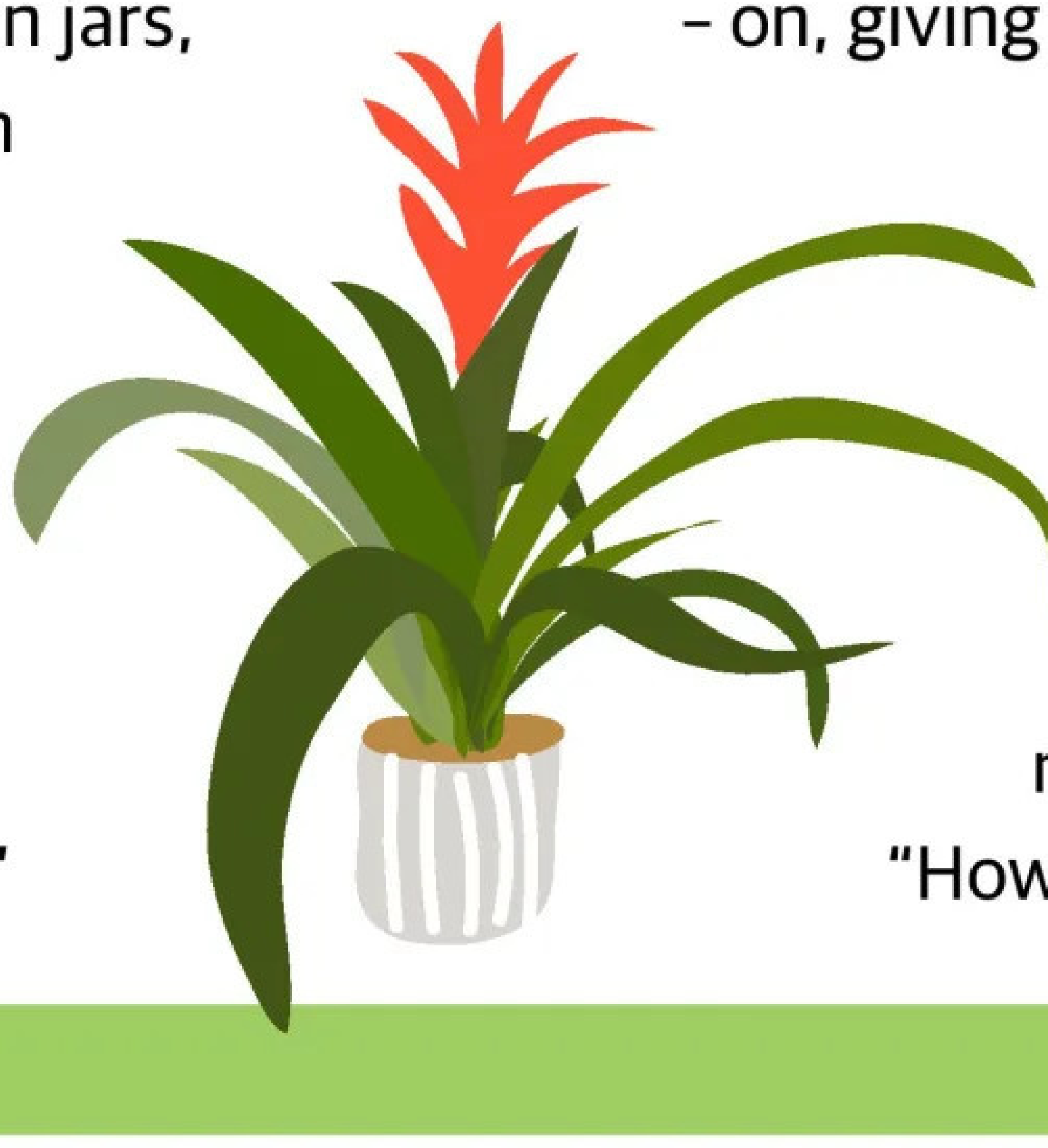
Claire is an orchid fan. "I have so many around the house," she says. "Because I've bought them throughout the year, they all flower at different times. The craze for succulents and terrariums is still huge, with hanging designs and planted mason jars, but there's also a revival in retro plants such as the Monstera (cheese plant), Senecio (string of beads or string of pearls), Chlorophytum (spider plant) and Sansevieria (snake plant)."

Shopping for plants

"There are new plant shops popping up everywhere, but your local garden centre is usually a good place to shop for plants," says Judith. "When you adopt a new plant, make sure you like the look of it and check the label or quickly search its needs online. You're looking for a fresh, healthy and bug-free plant. If in doubt, ask for help to find the perfect plant for your home and lifestyle. If you acquire a large number of plants at the same time, you may feel overwhelmed and it can get complicated taking care of them all, especially if you've never done it before."

But what if you want to go bold and create a living wall, perhaps in an extended kitchen? "It's on my list of things to do one day," says Mimi. Claire has shelving units at home that she layers plants – both upright and trailing species – on, giving the effect of a living wall while making it easy to change and maintain.

"Living walls are true pieces of art and require some in-depth plant knowledge," recommends Judith. "However, you can buy a prefab living wall with an integrated and automated hydroponic system. If you want to keep things simple, buy yourself a Neon Pothos and guide its branches onto your wall with small adhesive hooks. It's beautiful and easy. Or go for several wall planters that you can fill with crawling plants, like Philodendron scandens, Tradescantia, ivy and Boston ferns."



If you're looking for more ideas for displaying your new houseplant collection, Selina Lake, stylist and author of *Botanical Style* (Ryland Peters & Small, £14.19/$19.74), says: "Plant them up in a mix of containers, such as galvanised metal, concrete planters or baskets, then arrange in groups on a windowsill or display trolley. Why not use old wooden crates that can be stacked together to form the perfect place to arrange your houseplants on?"

"To turn your own urban jungle into a success, start small and let it grow with you," Judith says. "Make it personal and meaningful, and love each and every plant you choose."

3 HOUSEPLANTS TO TRY

PEACE LILY (SPATHIPHYLLUM)
Removing toxins like formaldehyde, benzene, trichloroethylene, xylene and ammonia in the air, peace lillies are toxic, so keep away from pets and children. Bedrooms or humid bathrooms are ideal. They require little attention and are hardy. Give them a good soaking and let the soil get fairly dry before watering again.

BOSTON FERNS (NEPHROLEPSIS)
This is one of the best plants when it comes to removing formaldehyde from the air. It's non-toxic and the feathery ferns look beautiful spilling out of hanging pots. Keep in a cool environment and give it lots of attention. These plants thrive in bright spots but keep the soil moist and directly out of the sun.

ALOE VERA (ALOE VERA)
Known for its health benefits, a lesser-known benefit is how well it removes benzene and formaldehyde from the air. Great for the bedroom as it produces oxygen at night while processing the carbon dioxide in the air, giving you purer air and a chance at a better night's sleep. Water deeply every two to three weeks.

Images, All Getty Images

GET CLOSER TO NATURE

Turn your garden into a wildlife haven for the creatures that share your space, says Leigh Clapp

Gardeners have a vital role to play in securing the future of our wildlife by gardening organically, thinking of the needs of bugs and animals, and by creating a balance between pests and their natural predators. Changes in the British countryside and encroaching urbanisation are causing natural habitats to shrink and change, putting increased pressure on our wildlife. We can help with a few changes of our own, even in small gardens, to make a patchwork of refuges across the country.

Wildlife needs two fundamental things: habitat – somewhere to breed and shelter; and sustenance – somewhere to forage throughout the year. Get the balance right and your garden will flourish while creating a food chain that manages the eco-system of your garden. Keep in mind the benefits of natural pest control, for example birds and frogs will take care of slugs and snails, and ladybirds love to eat aphids, greenfly and blackfly. The Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) recommends preventing and reducing pests and diseases by 'good cultivation, cultivar selection, garden hygiene, using biological controls, avoiding pesticides where possible, and accepting the presence of some pests that can provide larval food for pollinators.' Did you know that fewer than one per cent of British insects are garden pests? All the more reason to embrace the mini-beasts.

Wildlife-friendly is sometimes thought of as a messy garden, but this doesn't need to be the case. Attracting an abundance of pollinators will ensure our garden plants and crops continue to flourish.

Biodiversity is key. There is a rich diversity in our gardens, often with more pollinators than in our countryside, but there are lots of simple things we can do to encourage further visitors to our patches and create a green corridor for wildlife.

Most gardeners already think about growing a diverse spread of plants encompassing groundcovers, climbers, trees and shrubs, as well as a floral mix of perennials and annuals, so it's just a case of also considering their use for food and shelter. When selecting plants, spare a thought to including an array that will provide pollen or nectar over as long a season as possible, from early crocus and mahonia to winter-flowering viburnum and ivy. Select open flowers rather than double or highly bred cultivars for the best pollen, and to make easier access for bees, butterflies and other pollinating insects that have the absolutely essential task of fertilisation.

Grow a range of both native and introduced species, in mixed hedges, add trees that have both blossom and berries, and look closely at labels such as the RHS Perfect for Pollinators symbol. A note, though – if you are looking for plants for bees and pollinators, they should have been grown without synthetic pesticides. For assurance, it's worth hunting out an organic nursery and remember not to spray open flowers.

> "Grow a range of both native and introduced species"

Other easy steps include leaving some seedheads through winter before cutting down the borders completely in early spring, adding a log pile tucked out of sight, providing clean water in a birdbath or shallow dish, keeping a patch of grass long or planting a meadow of wafting flowers mingling with parchment grasses. A patch of nettles is a magnet for beneficial insects, in particular ladybirds for egg laying, and they are considered key to the survival of butterflies as a food source for many caterpillars such as peacock, tortoiseshell and comma. With careful harvesting you can also use nettles in the kitchen for medicinal tea or a hearty soup, as well an activator in the compost and liquid plant food. Increasing your garden's plant diversity and encouraging more wildlife to stop by will make a more interesting and healthy haven for you, too.

Get the buzz

It is estimated that 80 per cent of the Western diet is dependant on bee pollination, so it is important that we do what we can to help the health and survival of our bees:

- **The prime reason for the waning bee population is the parasitic varroa mite, but we can do our bit by adding pesticide-free nectar and pollen rich flowers.**
- Bees focus their pollen collecting near the hive, returning to the same source until it is depleted, so it is important to plan a succession of choices from early

10 EASY TIPS FOR A WILDLIFE-FRIENDLY GARDEN

1. **Choose plants attractive to native wildlife**
2. Grow a diversity of wild and cultivated plants
3. **Plant single, broad flowers to attract bees**
4. Allow some plants to go to seed
5. **Cut shrubs on a rotational basis**
6. Make space for mini-beasts to provide the whole food chain
7. **Use organic methods for pest control**
8. Include water in a container, birdbath or pond
9. **Place a pile of logs in a quiet corner of the garden**
10. Plant a perennial or annual meadow

spring to late autumn, and even into winter.

- **Provide long-flowering, single open flowers, old-fashioned cottage plants and native choices for food, water to drink and habitats for shelter.**
- Bumblebees may nest in tussocks of grass or moss on a bank of long grass at the edge of your plot. Planting catmint and clover should encourage them into your garden.
- **White-tailed bumblebees now survive our milder winters so planting winter-flowering nectar rich plants will help them do even better.**
- Solitary bees are not at all aggressive; bumblebees and honeybees are unlikely to sting unless disturbed, so enjoy watching them and leave them to forage in your garden.
- **Replace some of your lawn with a meadow area or some British wildflowers.**
- Clumps of bee-friendly plants, planted in sunny positions are more attractive to bees than scattered or shady spots.
- **Honeybees like saucer-shaped flowers as they are easier to get into with their short tongues.**
- Different species of bumblebees have different lengths of tongue, which means they feed from different shaped flowers.
- **Large shrubs and trees are a vital food source as well. Five established winter-/early spring-flowering trees supply a similar amount of pollen and nectar as an acre of meadow.**

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TOP PLANTS FOR WILDLIFE

1 **Sunflower** – Select single forms. Bees love them in summer and it's a seed buffet for birds later in the season. Sow in a sunny protected spot in spring, early summer.

2 **Foxglove** – *Digitalis purpurea* is a biennial wildflower loved by bumblebees. They do best in light shade. Ideal in borders and woodland.

3 **Teasel** – Architectural, spiky seedheads that last through winter. They provide food and shelter for a myriad of creatures, including bees and birds. Best in clay soil that doesn't dry out in summer.

4 **Echinops** – Herbaceous perennial that is a magnet for bees and other insects. Easy to grow in well-drained soil.

5 **Sedum** – Easy-to-grow succulent that provides nectar late in the season, and is a haven for bees, hoverflies and butterflies. Does best in full sun.

6 **Honeysuckle** – Fragrant flowers on a vigorous vine – great for nectar-loving insects, and berries for birds. Full sun or part shade.

7 **Pyracantha** – An evergreen shrub with clusters of white flowers in spring and red, orange or yellow berries in autumn. Birds enjoy the berries and shelter it provides, and the nectar is enjoyed by bees and butterflies.

8 **Malus, crab apple tree** – Native and exotic varieties suit all sizes of gardens. Birds enjoy the autumn fruits and bees love the spring blossom.

9 **Berberis** – Easy-care shrub for all but dry soils. Provides nectar for butterflies, plus shelter for caterpillars, and thorns create a barrier for safe nesting sites.

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Images: © Leigh Clapp; WIKI; Getty Images

EMBRACING DIFFERENT CULTURES

Alice Barnes-Brown offers expert advice on overcoming culture shock to ensure you get the most out of your travel experiences

Part of the joy of travelling is experiencing new cultures, traditions and ways of life. You can immerse yourself in a whole new world, try different things and see places far away from home. But it can also be a bit of a challenge when what you find is markedly different to what you're used to, or a little out of your comfort zone.

It's got a name, too: culture shock. You might hear or read about it before you travel, but you never think it'll happen to you. Many of us think that because we know our stuff about the places we travel to, we're prepared for anything. But in reality, even the most experienced adventurers can suffer from a few unexpected surprises on the road.

For example, you may encounter anything from a different set of table manners to an entirely new daily routine, making you feel a bit out of place in your latest destination. There's no 'one size fits all' to travelling, and every country has its own unique and highly developed culture, so it's impossible to prescribe a complete remedy for culture shock. Some things you'll like and some things you might not, but it's all an experience.

If you struggle with the local language, or your native one is not widely spoken, the feeling of being an outsider might be exacerbated. If it gets really bad, it's natural to want to curl up and get away from it all for a while. But don't worry, we've got all the information you need to get you raring to go out there again and make the most of your trip.

Research and respect

The best possible thing that you can do to get rid of culture shock is to respect the local culture. If it's appropriate, try to assimilate wherever possible. Accepting that some places do things differently to others is all part of the enriching experience that travelling provides. And, pragmatically, you don't want to stand out from the crowd and reveal yourself to be a tourist – as well as earning some of the locals' respect, you avoid marking yourself out as an easy target for petty crime, like theft.

So, in order to learn about what to expect before you even hit the ground, read up on it. The internet is filled with tons of useful information about the places you're visiting. Blogs and videos from people who have been there, done that, are a fantastic place to start. Be careful though – what's easy enough for them may not be comfortable for you, so do a bit of digging to find a blog with a similar perspective to your own.

To get more of the basics, and to find out if there are any particular things for people of your nationality to watch out for, check out your government's foreign office website and search for the countries you're visiting. Here you can get a good idea of how you might be perceived abroad – and any risks involved – if you behaved the same way you would at home. Bear in mind that official advice can often be overcautious – it's good to know and take on board, but don't be put off by it.

If you prefer a more relaxing and less-technological research mission, hunt down some travel books. They're hugely enjoyable reads, and their authors provide unparalleled insight into the mindset of local people. The writers

PACKING ESSENTIALS

SHAWLS

Whether you need it to cover your head and shoulders before you go into a religious site, or simply to protect yourself from the sun when it gets hot, a shawl is one of the most versatile things a traveller can pack. You can also buy ones adorned with traditional patterns in the local market, and start a fun collection of global shawls.

PHRASEBOOK

Although English is widely spoken around the world, you'll come across people who cannot speak the language. Don't worry – just take a pocket-sized phrasebook with you. You can speak from it, or if you're really struggling, point to phrases written inside. The other person will understand what you mean.

SOMETHING FROM HOME

While travelling is incredibly fun, there's no denying that when you're feeling the culture shock, homesickness can hit you hard. Make sure you take something from home – like a lucky item or favourite trinket – to bring you a little bit of comfort and joy when you're away.

often spend a considerable amount of time getting to know and participating in the cultures they are writing about.

Inequalities

Another thing that could shock you is the inequality you might encounter in some societies. Whether it's between rich and poor, men and women, ethnic groups, sexualities and so on, you are bound to be confronted with some form of discrimination. You may be required to change your behaviour to blend in, even if you don't necessarily agree with it.

Women are more susceptible to prejudice when travelling, so may fall victim to culture shock a bit easier, as they are not always afforded the same level of respect as back home. For instance, if you're a woman travelling in a particularly religious country, you may be expected to partially or fully cover your body – including your head. If you're a woman travelling solo, you will sometimes need to be wary of speaking to men by yourself, as this may be frowned upon. Additionally, in some places you may find it comfortable to pretend to be married, in order to ward off sexual harassment.

Sadly, the discrimination might not end there. LGBTQ+ people can experience trouble in conservative countries where their relationships and sexualities are not fully accepted, so this is something to bear in mind before you go. People with disabilities, as well as people from different ethnic backgrounds and religious views, might have to navigate their own sets of problems. But if you're a keen traveller, you can surmount these issues and still have an incredible time.

Politics and religion

Politics can be a touchy issue when travelling, and not just at border control. In many authoritarian and monarchical countries, while you might be keen to get the scoop on what it's like to live in that particular country, its subjects might be decidedly quiet on the topic. Be sensitive and don't push them – they might be afraid that something bad might happen to them if they were to criticise the government. If you really want to know what it's like, make your own observations while you're there – but if the political situation is strained, be careful not to fall foul of the authorities.

As religion can play an important role in any society, it's key that you read up on the religious makeup of where you're going. The laws and customs of a place can be deeply shaped by faith, so it's really important to respect the beliefs of local people. If you're travelling during the time of a holy festival or event, you can observe how people celebrate, and much of the time you'll be encouraged to join in. Whether that's ringing in the Chinese New Year, throwing coloured paint during Holi, or eating your weight in food during Eid, you'll find that religious festivals can be a wonderful time to really get to know where you're exploring.

However, sometimes religious festivals and events can affect how you travel. During the holidays, you can expect many places to be closed or operating on irregular hours. If you're in need of urgent snacks or travel supplies, you may be

COMMON MISTAKES

1 KEEPING YOUR SHOES ON

In people's homes, public buildings and religious sites around the world, it's often offensive to keep your shoes on, as you are bringing dirt from the outside world into a much-loved space. Always ask your hosts if you need to remove footwear; if others are doing it, make sure you follow suit.

2 USING YOUR LEFT HAND

You might find that some places are a bit superstitious about the use of the left hand. This is often especially true when it pertains to eating, as the left hand is conventionally used for bathroom purposes in some cultures. If you're left-handed, bear this in mind when you travel.

3 OFFENSIVE HAND GESTURES

Hand gestures are tricky, and we're bound to make mistakes sometimes. For instance, what looks like an innocent 'peace' sign can be insulting when flipped the other way around, especially in places such as the UK, Australia, India and other Commonwealth countries. Just read up and be careful!

caught short. You can easily find out whether religious holidays will affect you by heading to the internet and seeing what other travellers say. On rare occasions, you may be expected to behave a certain way, too. For instance, during Ramadan, it may be advisable not to eat in public during daylight hours. This will avoid unnecessarily offending anyone who is fasting – and it will save you a lot of money on eating out, too!

You might also get over your culture shock a bit quicker if you dress a little more like the locals. Whether it's because you're getting a few stares because you haven't dressed modestly enough, or maybe you've just seen the locals out and about looking lovely in traditional clothing, you might feel the need to change up your wardrobe. In many places around the world, Western clothing is normalised and widely worn – particularly by young people – but in some destinations it can be more practical and fun to ditch your jeans, and try out the local garb. Head to the nearest market or shopping centre to pick some up.

> "The laws and customs of a place can be deeply shaped by faith"

Food and drink

Another thing you might be a bit startled by when travelling is all the new kinds of food you'll encounter. Embarking on a tasty adventure is all part of your journey, but you may find that food in other countries isn't quite to your taste. After all, every culture puts its own unique spin on dishes and the experience of eating in general. For example, some places might have a higher tolerance to spice than back home, so if you order spicy food it may be wise to ask for the heat to be taken down a notch. Even if you think you can handle it, it's better to be safe and enjoy your meal, than sorry and unable to finish it.

If you have certain dietary requirements, you might struggle to find the food you usually consume at home. However, supermarkets are generally well stocked with anything you may need, regardless of where you are in the world. If you have a specific diet you need to follow then self-catering might be a better option for you. Plus, a look around your local supermarket is a fun way to find out what the locals really like to eat. You might even find familiar things there to remind you of home.

With food and drink often come new conventions for etiquette and table manners, such as only eating with your right hand, or getting to grips with new utensils. Wherever you go, try to do as the locals do. If you have a host or a guide to help you

Image: Alamy (eating)

LEARN A LANGUAGE

It might seem like a lot of effort, but learning the local lingo before you go anywhere will make your trip so much more special. If you can walk around a place and read some of the signs, or even have a short conversation with somebody, you'll feel less like a run-of-the-mill tourist and more like a real adventurer. Thankfully, these days it's so much easier to learn a new language.

One of the best places to start is YouTube, where you can find lots of beginners' courses in pretty much any language. Here, native speakers will teach you some key phrases and conversation starters. If there's a new writing system to learn, it can help you get to grips with that, too. For those who would like to get more advanced, you can always do it the old-fashioned way and buy a textbook. As well as learning an extensive vocabulary, you can practise your reading skills and even get a handle on grammar – which can be a thorn in any language learner's side.

If you're always busy, there are apps you can download to your phone that you can use anywhere. One of these is Duolingo (**www.duolingo.com**), which teaches you basic words and phrases. Or, for a more social alternative, try language exchange app Tandem (**www.tandem.net**), where you can meet and chat with native speakers, and improve each other's skills, and you might even make a new friend!

out, then closely copy what they're doing. In places like East Asia, many backpackers find it tricky to understand intricate eating formalities, so try to be as polite as possible and take things slowly. In other places, it's customary to eat with your hands, which may also be new to you. In any case, explain that you're keen to learn the proper way to dine – many people will totally understand that you are new there and be keen to show you how it's done.

If having an alcoholic drink or two is something that you like to do when you are abroad, make sure to get to know the local laws and customs concerning alcohol. As well as taking the usual precautions you would at home – keeping an eye on your drink at all times and being sure not to drink too much – it's worth noting how alcohol is viewed. Excessive drinking might be frowned upon; in many places being drunk in public is punished very harshly. In a few deeply religious countries, you might not be able to buy alcohol at all. But wherever you are, respect the culture by drinking in moderation and you'll still have fun. Perhaps some new local friends will give you a taste of their regional tipple, or show you their favourite watering hole.

Manners

Another part of human interaction that differs wildly from place to place is manners. Some societies pride themselves on politeness and deference, while others might be more vibrant and insistent. You'll get a good sense for what it's like as you do your research, but always expect the unexpected when travelling – your initial impressions of a place could be completely dashed.

In terms of meeting and interacting with people, always start off by being polite and see how the conversation goes. When you meet people for the first time, look out for any customary greetings you should use. Whether it's a short bow or a firm handshake, do your best to return any gesture that comes your way. There's nothing wrong with being too formal, and nothing worse than seeming rude.

You may also be expected to show more reverence for older people than you otherwise would at home. This is because

elders are often seen as wise and authoritative, people whose superior experience of life affords them respect. That might include using their formal titles, or not speaking to them out of turn. If in doubt, smile, try your best and apologise if you think you've made a mistake – everyone is human!

At the other end of the scale, you might get to a place and think it's a bit overly touchy-feely. If you're not used to being hugged, pecked on the cheek or heavily patted when you meet someone new, you'll be a bit taken aback by friendly societies where this is commonplace. But if you don't detect weird vibes from someone, this could be a great opportunity to get accustomed to such affectionate behaviour and to open yourself up to new experiences.

Embrace the differences

One of the most authentic encounters you can have while travelling is a visit to the mazes of shops and stalls that form the marketplace. From the souks of North Africa to the floating markets of Thailand, across the world there's always a place where people go to grab a bargain and check out local products. It's a great place to see a cross-section of a country's produce and people.

However, something many backpackers and travellers struggle with is the practice of haggling. For many Western countries, it simply isn't done – the price is nearly always fixed as it's labelled. When you go to a place where haggling is commonplace (which covers most places, except northwest Europe and North America), it might seem rude to offer a lower price than the seller tells you, but don't be afraid – it's expected! You'd probably get a funny look if you agreed to the first price (especially as it's likely to have been set above the actual value). It can be intimidating to try, but haggling is never personal. Start off with a price that's a quarter or a half of what the seller initially suggests, and aim to meet somewhere at the lower end or in the middle. If they don't budge, walk away and say you can get it at another shop – more often than not, they'll come chasing after you and will offer you a lower price.

Most importantly of all, remember to have fun and really throw yourself into the culture of the place you're visiting. It can often endear you in the eyes of the people you meet there, and you'll become a more rounded person as a result of your efforts.

While the idea of being somewhere completely different from home can be scary, it's also incredibly exciting – and if you do your research, always be respectful and open yourself to new ideas, we're sure you'll have a wonderful time wherever you go.

Images, All Getty Images unless stated

WORLD TOUR

With your newfound free time in retirement, why not explore what the world around you has to offer?

VENICE

Navigate the unique waterways of Italy's City of Bridges

Venice is known throughout the world as the City of Canals, among many other names. One such name is the Floating City, made up as it is of 118 islands connected by canals, which can be crossed by one of 400 bridges. It measures just eight square kilometres (three square miles), but packs an astonishing number of stunning landmarks, cafes and activities into that small space.

Conveniently, three of those landmarks are all within a couple of minutes' walk from each other – namely Doge's Palace, St Mark's Basilica and St Mark's Square.

Doge's Palace is the spectacular result of a project lasting several centuries. Started in the 9th century, the seat of the Venetian government continued to be developed and redeveloped until well into the 17th century. This drawn-out building process means that the palace features an array of architectural styles, from Gothic to Renaissance – guaranteed to delight both the casual and committed architecture enthusiast. The palace wasn't only the Venetian Parliament; it was home to the Doge, and has also acted as a prison and the city's court, but is now a fascinating museum. It may be worth more than one visit too, because the palace changes colour throughout the day depending on the light – sometimes appearing white, but other times taking on a pinkish hue. The palace is well worth a walk around, but be sure to take a look at it from the Bridge of Sighs, which provides the best view of the palace. Be prepared, however, to battle dozens of fellow tourists attempting to do the same.

> "Is a trip to Venice truly complete without a ride on a gondola?"

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

As there are no cars in Venice, park just outside the city and get the bus into the town.

Time zone	**UTC+1**
Best time to visit	**June to July**
Currency	**€ Euro**

Useful sites

veneziaunica.it/en/content/visit-venice-0
visit-venice-italy.com
venice-tourism.com/en

Also built in the 9th century, St Mark's Basilica houses the remains of St Mark the Evangelist. The city cathedral was built in the Byzantine style and has a staggering 8,000 square metres (86,000 square feet) of mosaic covering the walls and vaults. A visit to the Basilica has to be on anyone's Venice itinerary, as is a trip to the top of the 99-metre (323-foot) tall Campanile for incredible views of the city.

The square was built at the same time as the Basilica, and was enlarged in the 12th century – rapidly developing into the heart of the city. The square is the biggest open space in Venice, and can be a welcome relief to the at-times claustrophobic nature of the city. It may be a tad expensive, but there are few better places in the world to kick back with a coffee than at one of the cafes surrounding the square.

With no roads or cars in Venice, there are three ways to get around: on foot, via a water bus or on a gondola. The city is incredibly easy to walk around, but make sure you have a detailed map if you're without a guide, as the 2,650 alleys can get quite boggling! Other than the footbridges, the water bus is the best way to cross the canals or travel through the city if you're getting tired. These aren't cheap, but they are regular and it's a lovely way to cruise a Venetian canal if you don't fancy shelling out for a gondola.

Having said that, is a trip to Venice truly complete without a ride on a gondola? These boats are synonymous with the city, and provide a romantic, fun way to spend 40 minutes, guided by a local expert. There are just 400 licensed gondoliers in Venice, and only two or three licenses are given out per year after a rigorous exam process, so you know you are getting the very best that Venice has to offer. It's a beautiful, unique way to see a city.

The city is a work of art in itself, but if you are in the mood for even more, the Peggy Guggenheim Museum should be an essential part of your trip. Situated in Guggenheim's old house, there are dozens of pieces of Italian and American artwork, as well as new exhibits that have earned this museum global accolades.

Also on the theme of art, many famous films have been set and shot in Venice. *Don't Look Now*, the 1973 movie starring Julie Christie and Donald Sutherland, purposefully avoided many of the main tourist locations in the city. A ten-minute walk from St Mark's Square will take you to Fondamenta San Severo, which is the site for the iconic scene when John Baxter first sees the figure in red, while five minutes further on brings you to the church that Baxter was restoring.

Make time for a stroll alongside the Grand Canal. While St Mark's Square may be the heart of the city, the Grand Canal is its main artery. The best views are from the iconic Rialto Bridge, built in the 16th century and, for a long time, the only way to cross the Grand Canal. The bridge is busy and bustling with street traders, giving visitors an authentic city experience.

Venice is a beautiful step back through time, with its absence of cars and elegant Renaissance-era buildings. There are wondrous views around every corner, delicious foods to sample, and experiences like no other city, so it's well worth a visit.

Images: All Getty Images

SHARM EL-SHEIKH

Fly into Egypt's prime holiday destination for thrilling coral reef diving and beaches galore

Sharm el-Sheikh is located at the southern tip of the Sinai Peninsula, and with a dedicated airport, this is the perfect place to kick back by the pool, visit historical sites, practise your haggling skills and even learn how to scuba dive.

Na'ama Bay is at the heart of Sharm el-Sheikh's beach life. Take a stroll on to the hot, white sands and dip your feet in the warm waters for complete relaxation. The midday heat, however, can become intense in July and August, so visiting the beach early morning is recommended. Reaching out directly from a strip of luxury hotels and resorts, Na'ama Bay is renowned for its range of cafes and shops, with many sellers attempting to draw you in to peruse the goods.

A holiday to Sharm el-Sheikh should not go without a trip to the Ras Muhammad National Park, just 38 kilometres (23 miles) further south along the peninsula. This area of natural beauty features a selection of impressive dive sites that makes snorkelling and scuba diving a top attraction for visitors. Head to the Shark Observatory, close to Main Beach, for incredible views over the surrounding area (the chances of spotting sharks, however, are very slim). Go to Salt Lake for a spot of swimming, and then head to Old Quay Beach or Jolanda Bay for some excellent coral reef diving. On your way out, drive by the Mangroves and see how the vegetation sprawls out into the crystal-clear waters of the Red Sea.

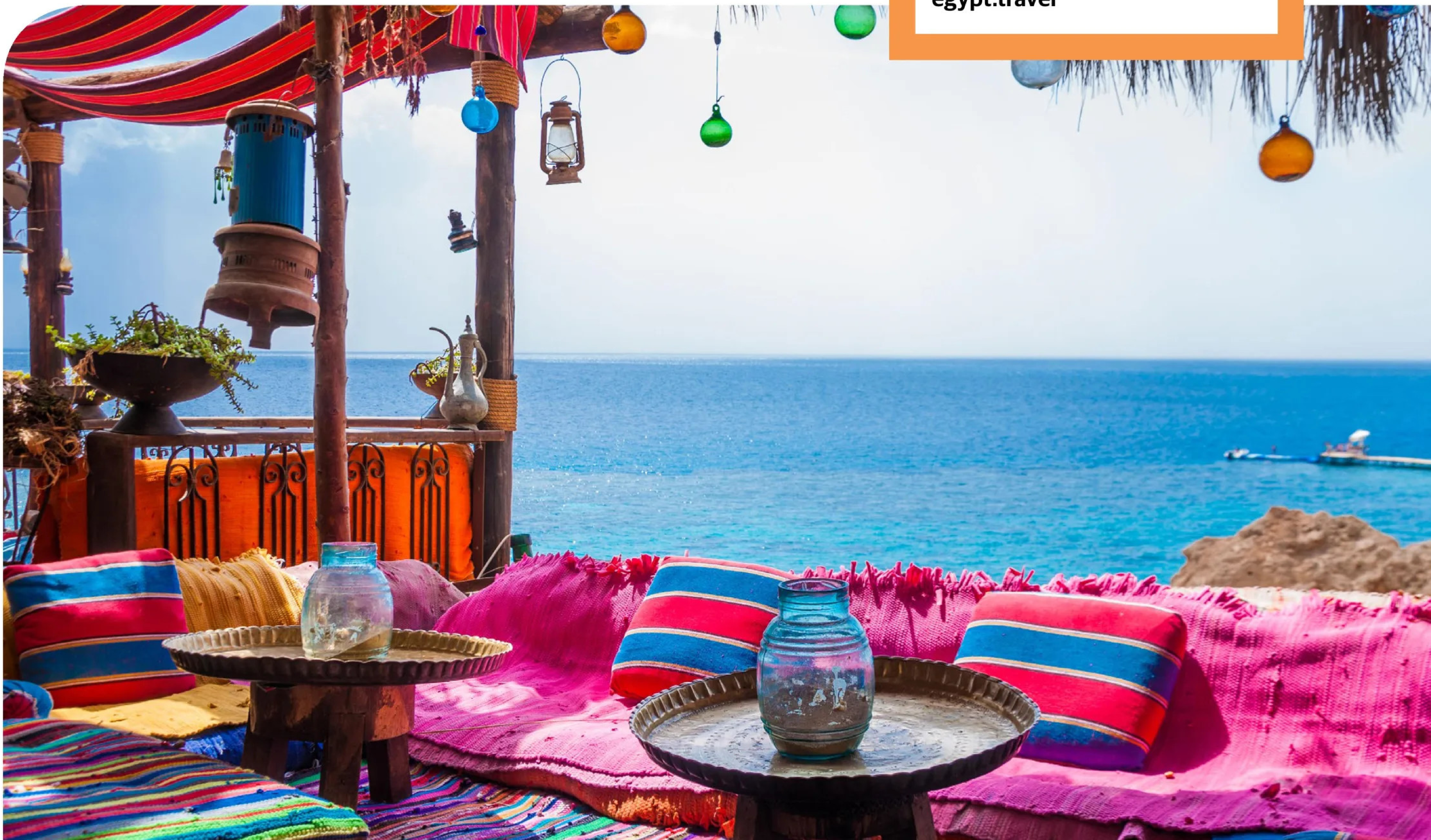
ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Plan your day trips to start early morning or late afternoon, as temperatures can be unbearable around midday.

Time zone	UTC+2
Best time to visit	October to April
Currency	£ Egyptian Pound

Useful sites

sinaimonastery.com
emperordivers.com
egypt.travel



> “There’s something for everyone here, no matter your budget”

For one of the best beach experiences Sharm el-Sheikh has to offer, and a much quieter location compared to that of the busier Na’ama Bay, head to Ras Um Sid just five kilometres (three miles) to the south of the main town. This spot is the perfect snorkelling location for those looking for a more casual coral reef experience, with some amazing sea life and rare fish species waiting to be seen. Don’t miss out on the most exciting diving experience on the Sinai Peninsula: the Thistlegorm wreck. This is the site of a British army freighter that sank during World War II. It has been well preserved in the salt water of the Red Sea. Ideal for more experienced divers, the site is located 33 metres (108 feet) down on the seabed, featuring motorbikes, cars, trucks and many more items within the ship’s holds. Towards the stern of the ship, get up close to the turrets and machine guns as well as the ship’s large propeller at the rear. Book yourself on a full-day boat trip with prices starting at around £70 ($91), or a two-day trip with a night’s stay on a boat (the latter includes a night dive of the wreck). This is truly a wondrous site to behold and is the perfect opportunity for those looking to experience a bit more than just sea life.

Chances are you’ll want to head over to Tiran Island, accessible by boat just six kilometres (four miles) off the coast of Sharm el-Sheikh. Although the island belongs to Saudi Arabia, it is actually part of the Ras Muhammad National Park. Visitors are invited to dive and snorkel around the island to experience the array of amazing coral reefs, clear waters and another impressive shipwreck.

If you’re planning to spend more of your time in Sharm el-Sheikh on dry land, there’s a plethora of locations to visit further inland. Book a trip further afield to Colored Canyon, situated northward up the Sinai Peninsula coastline. Walk through the 800-metre (2,600-foot) canyon around glowing orange pinnacles and amazing boulders. This place offers itself as an ideal photography location for stunning sunrise and sunset shots, capturing the dramatic landscape and colours from the rock surfaces.

Saint Catherine’s Monastery, located more centrally on the Sinai Peninsula, is considered to be one of the oldest working monasteries in the world. Located 210 kilometres (130 miles) from Sharm el-Sheikh, a day’s tour can be organised from most resorts. Tour prices start at £33 ($43). Remember when visiting the site that appropriate dress codes must be considered, including no shorts or exposed skin over shoulders. The monastery houses some of the most renowned religious icons in the world, attracting pilgrims from across the world.

Camel riding is a favourite among visitors to Sharm el-Sheikh, with tour operators offering camel safaris across the Sinai Desert. Usually lasting for an hour, expect to pay from £40 ($52) per person. After experiencing the slow and bumpy ride, most tour operators offer the chance for you to sample authentic local tea and food with Bedouin people. This is a great chance to get a sense of what desert life is like for local people.

Take a day to explore the local bazaars and markets of Sharm el-Sheikh and pick up a souvenir or two at the Old Market; or pay a visit to Soho Square for award-winning entertainment and a plethora of restaurants. When you’re not dining out, Soho Square features an ice rink, bowling alley and tennis courts to keep kids and adults entertained throughout the day.

There’s truly something for everyone in Sharm el-Sheikh, no matter what your budget may be. Whether you’re after a relaxing time away from home chilling on the beach, or a more adventurous trip in which you can push your scuba-diving skills, or explore some natural wonders, there’s so much to do.

Images; All Getty Images

CHIANG MAI

Thailand's Chiang Mai is a celebration of tradition and contemporary culture

Set amid the mountains and rainforests of northern Thailand, the coolest part of the country, literally and figuratively, is Chiang Mai. Once the capital of the Lanna Kindgom, which ruled northern Thailand for half a millennium, it is today the country's second-largest city, sitting along the border of Myanmar.

At its heart is the Old Town, a striking example of traditional Thai architecture, contained within a moat and a rare example of extant city walls. The sleepy centre makes for remarkable walking, through the eastern Tapae Gate and into Wat Chiang Man, the city's oldest Buddhist temple.

One of the city's most beautiful temples is Wat Phra Singh, 'The Temple of the Lion Buddha', hosting hundreds of monks and novices. The 14th-century monastery's assembly hall makes a lavish display of power – with a teak exterior, adorned with ornamental accoutrements in gold and ochre. Inside, walls feature elegant murals, depicting local and Buddhist folklore, leading up to a rear wall of red lacquer and gold leaf. Here sits the highly venerated Phra Singh Lion Buddha, which is paraded through the city every April during the Thai New Year festival, Songkran.

Though the nearby Wat Chedi Luang is not the largest temple in the area, it boasts a magnificent chedi (pagoda), which stood as Chiang Mai's tallest structure, at 85 metres (279 feet), until an earthquake knocked it down to 60 metres (197 feet). Commissioned by King Saen Muang Ma to hold his father's ashes, it took a century to build, and once housed the Emerald Buddha – the country's most revered icon.

At the edge of the Old Town, Somphet Market sizzles up local snacks. Beyond is a plethora of cafes, art galleries and modern restaurants, representing the embrace of tradition and modernity that has transformed Chiang Mai into a tantalising food-lovers' destination. Centred around Nimmanhaemin Road is

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

When visiting hill tribes, be sure to choose an ethical tour operator.

Time zone UTC+7

Best time to visit October to February (for cool, dry weather) or April to October (to avoid the crowds)

Currency ฿ Thai Baht

Useful sites

tourismthailand.org
travelhubchiangmai.com
guesthouse-chiangmai.com

the city's capital of 'cool', awash with antiques, handcrafts, boutiques and cafes.

Just outside the city, the Baan Kang Wat artists' village unites traditional and modern architecture, enveloped in greenery. Its eccentric vendors sell local, organic and sustainable goods, alongside hair salons, a library cafe and yoga studios – many of which offer workshops for those eager to learn pottery and other crafts.

Chiang Mai is a beacon for spiritual wanderers, with a wide variety of yoga, wellness and energy-healing schools, courses and teachers. With the city surrounded by beautiful temples, it is a natural lighthouse for the soul. An hour outside the city, The Pavana Resort hosts a whole range of retreats, orientated around detoxification, healthy eating, breathing and clearing the mind.

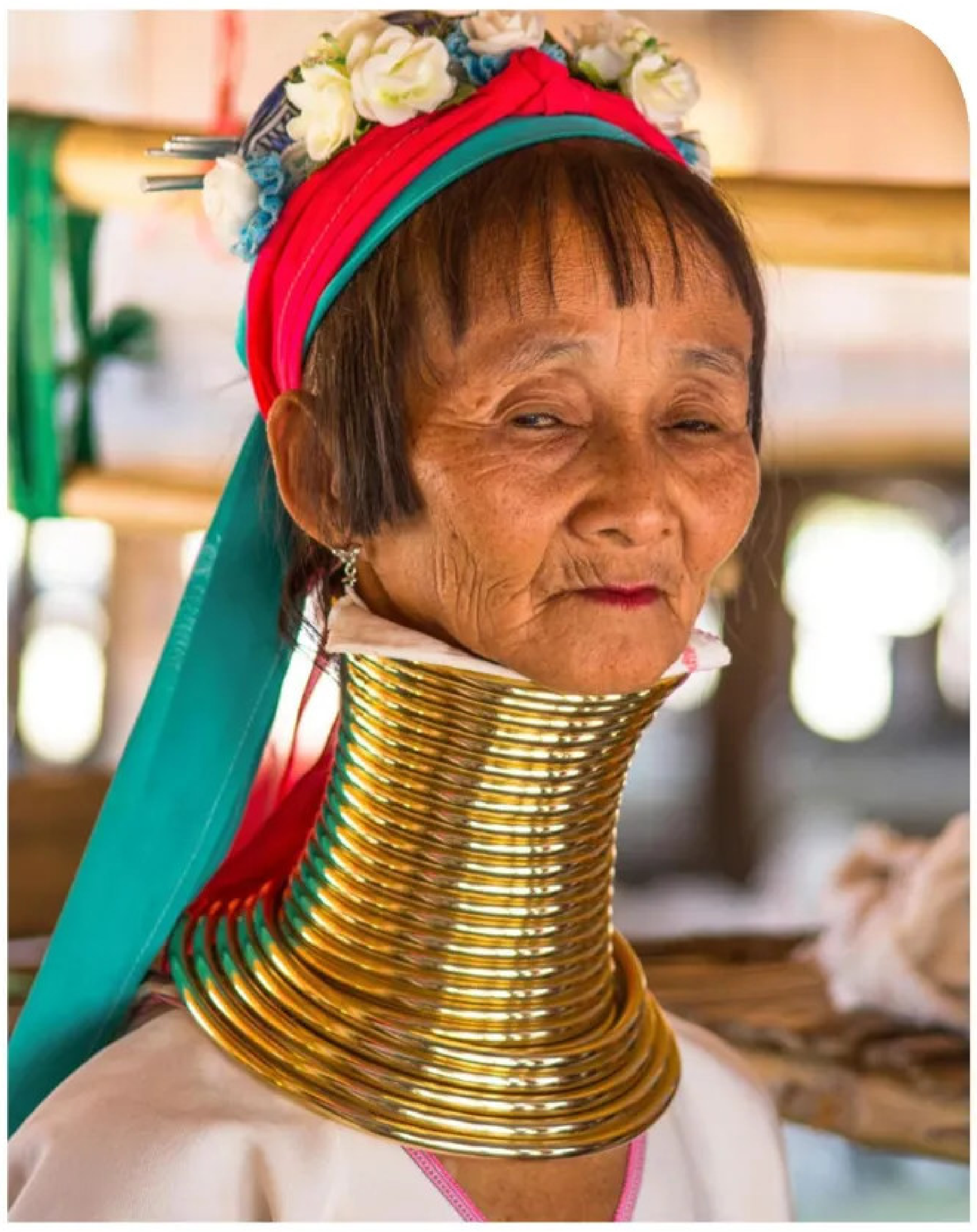
Elsewhere, Origin Thailand features a reconstructed traditional village, where guests can delve deeper into Thai etiquette, music, dance, flower arrangement and textiles. Back in the city, contemporary jewellery shop Nova also offers classes in Chiang Mai's art of silversmithing. On Saturday nights, Wualai Road, once known for its silver and lacquer workshops, turns into a bright, colourful market – a favourite walking trail among city-break pilgrims. A larger, one-kilometre (0.6-mile) market, complete with bars and food vendors, runs on Sundays between Tha Phae Gate and Ratchadamnoen Road.

> "Aside from natural beauty, Chiang Mai is surrounded by hill tribe villages"

Though dizzying, Chiang Mai's oldest bazaar, Talat Warorot, is a treasure trove of surprises – from daily essentials and cooking utensils to delicious treats and trinkets. Set beside the Talat Ton Lam Yai flower market, it rests against the Ping River, which vendors traditionally used to haul in local produce. The river can be navigated by kayak, scorpion-tailed boat or even a full-on dinner cruise, with an expedition of a local riverside farmhouse, growing fruits, herbs and flowers.

Those who prefer the company of birds and waterfalls will enjoy hikes through Wat Phra That Doi Suthep, Doi Chiang Dao and Doi Inthanon National Park – home to Thailand's tallest mountain, with a modern temple sat atop.

Aside from natural beauty, Chiang Mai is surrounded by hill tribe villages, migrated from various parts of China and South East Asia. The largest group, the Karen, are refugees from Myanmar. Women from the Karen subgroup, the Padaung, are instantly recognisable by their incredibly long necks, stretched slowly with a series of heavy brass rings, and colourful clothes. Many even have blackened teeth from chewing betel.



For those really looking to go off the grid and immerse themselves in a forgotten culture, homestays are available. The Chai Lai Sisters Karen Homestay remains a comfortable compromise, with limited electricity courtesy of solar panels, and profits going towards a charity for at-risk ethnic minority and refugee women.

Images: All Getty Images except top right (Alamy)

GRAND CANYON

Marvel at the beauty of this natural slice through southwest USA

Surprisingly, the Grand Canyon doesn't set many records. It isn't the longest, nor the widest, not even the deepest. However, it is by far the most famous, so much so that many people simply call it The Canyon as though there were no others in the world.

Multicoloured layers of rock sink into the earth, forming a chasm that gives the impression it must have been created by tectonic plates tearing apart. However, this slice through the United States was created over several million years – geologists still argue exactly how long ago – when the Colorado River meandered across what is now north Arizona. Erosion from the flowing water combined with the uplift of the Colorado Plateau to carve a mile-deep canyon. The rocks that are left behind were once covered by the waters of a warm, shallow sea or swampland, but now shimmer under the sun in a hot, dry desert.

For those interested in the statistics, the Grand Canyon stretches for 446 kilometres (277 miles), reaches 29 kilometres (18 miles) at its widest and measures 1,857 metres (6,093 feet) at its deepest. Nobody will ever see the whole thing in one visit, but it is possible to take in the majesty and grandeur in a day or two.

The popular sites of the South Rim may be busy, but they draw the crowds for a reason. Grand Canyon Village, with a number of wooden buildings dating to the turn of the 20th century, gives a glimpse of canyon country in the final days of the American Frontier. From here, Hermit Road runs west for 11 kilometres (eight miles) to the stone-built Hermit's Rest. Those who are keen to hike a portion of the Canyon will find this the easiest way to get their boots dusty: jump on board the free shuttle bus to Hermit's Rest and walk back to Grand Canyon Village along the Rim Trail. For those who prefer to see their natural wonders from the comfort of a seat, hop on and off the buses to your heart's content at the designated stops and viewpoints.

The quieter Desert View Drive, heading east from Grand Canyon Village, is the best way to escape the tourist hordes. This 40-kilometre (25-mile) road does not have a shuttle bus service so relies on visitors having their own wheels, but it includes six viewpoints and five unmarked pullover points. Don't miss Navajo Point and Lipan Point, two places where the dusky red layers of rock can be seen at their best. The road ends at the Desert View Watchtower, just beyond the stunning Tusayan Ruins. These are the eerie remains of a Puebloan village, first constructed nearly 1,000 years ago by around 20 Native Americans who called this land home.

Coachloads of tourists go no further than the viewpoints of the South Rim, but it's difficult to look down the steep walls of the Grand Canyon and not wonder what is down there. Bright Angel Trail, beginning in Grand Canyon Village, drops 1,340 metres (4,380 feet) over 13 kilometres (eight miles) to the banks of the Colorado River at the bottom of the cliffs. Given the nature of the descent, expect seemingly endless switchbacks and aching knees, although at least it's only another three kilometres (two miles) to the comfortable beds at Phantom Ranch, the only lodge beyond the rim.

Only 16 kilometres (ten miles) from Grand Canyon Village as the crow flies, but a five-hour drive around the gorge, North Rim is the quieter side of Grand Canyon with only ten per cent of the park's visitors venturing across. It makes it the ideal place to seek sanctuary from the crowds. The north is also the colder

"The North Rim is the ideal place to seek sanctuary from the crowds"

side since it is around 300 metres (1,000 feet) higher than the South Rim. While those on the North Rim can be stood in falling snow, others far below might be sunbathing along the river bank.

It is now 150 years since John Wesley Powell led the first expedition through Grand Canyon in 1869 to explore an unknown section on American maps. Those who want to follow the trailblazing path of the pioneers should join one of the waterborne excursions leaving Lee's Ferry in the summer months. Itineraries range from a few days to a few weeks.

But perhaps the best way to really appreciate the scale of the Grand Canyon is from the air. Scenic flights by helicopter and aeroplane leave from Grand Canyon Airport on South Rim, while others depart from Las Vegas, enabling visitors to Sin City to glimpse the Grand Canyon between trips to the gaming tables. Passengers who are lucky enough to find themselves on board are able to marvel at the sheer immensity of the gorge.

To limit noise and ensure passenger safety, the National Park Service limits the number of flights and no longer allows them to dip below the rim. However, some helicopter excursions do land within the Canyon on the Havasupai and Hualapai Reservations, located outside National Park jurisdiction. The Havasupai portion of the Canyon is home to the spectacular waterfalls of Havasu Creek, a tributary of the Colorado. For sheer beauty, this is one of the finest places in the region. The star attraction is the Grand Canyon Skywalk, a glass-bottomed, horseshoe-shaped walkway that extends 21 metres (70 feet) over the rim. It may not be a comfortable experience for those who are afraid of heights, but the makers claim it will hold the weight of 70 Boeing 747 aeroplanes.

Images: All Getty Images

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Although South Rim is open all year round, be aware that North Rim closes during the winter months.

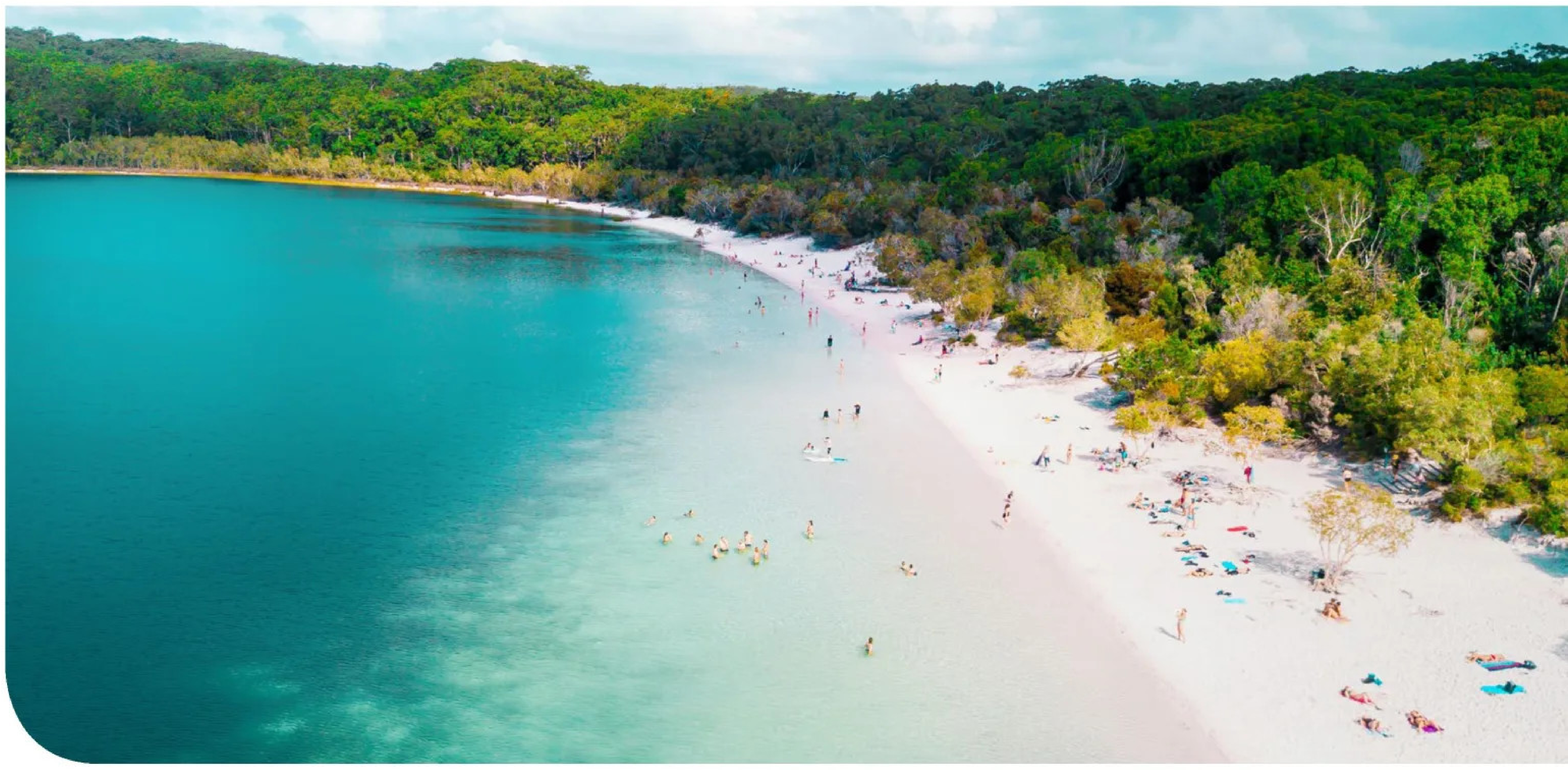
Time zone	UTC-7
Best time to visit	May to October
Currency	$ US Dollar

Useful sites

nps.gov/grca
grandcanyon.com
explorethecanyon.com

FRASER ISLAND

Set alongside Australia's Queensland coast is a mysterious island, fiercely unique and wild



Part of the Great Sandy National Park, Fraser Island is home to the world's oldest dunes. However, this is no typical subtropical paradise. Stretching 123 kilometres (76 miles) long and 22 kilometres (14 miles) wide, Fraser Island is the largest sand island in the world. More than that, dressed in luscious layers of foliage, the UNESCO World Heritage Site is the planet's only sand island to boast a rainforest. It is an island in motion, an ever-evolving snapshot of nature at its most innovative.

No matter how it is reached, a good starting point is to stock up on supplies at the settlements of Eurong, Happy Valley, Cathedrals or Orchid Beach – though visitors are advised to bring medical kits and water with them when they visit.

From here, Fraser Island, known by its aboriginal name of K'gari, is best enjoyed aboard a four-wheel drive (or 4WD), throttling along its 250-kilometre (155-mile) shoreline, rocky roads and looming rainforests.

Along the way, the island unveils its hidden gems, not so much diamonds in the rough as perpetual masterpieces, forever in perfection. The island's most immediately staggering feature is its rainforest. Across Pile Valley, which has survived some serious deforestation, giant satinay trees stretch straight towards the clear blue sky, alongside the brush box, spreading outwards like bursts of green clouds. They are joined by thin piccabeen palms with outstretched feathery fronds, and cherry satinash, sprouting a popular 'bush food', along with the resilient blush satinash, abloom with fluffy, white flowers. Elsewhere, Wanggoolba Creek is shaded beneath a walkway of rare king ferns, holding their leaning fronds up using water pressure.

Behind the northeastern lookout of Waddy Point, the subtropical rainforest is characterised by the scribbly gum – a light-coloured eucalyptus tree, with dark scribbles drawn up by the scribbly moth's larvae. These are kept company by the red bloodwood, an evergreen reaching heights of 35 metres (115 feet), oozing with an essential oil much-coveted in aboriginal herbal medicine. While Fraser Island's choppy seas are unsafe for swimming, the nearby Champagne Pools create a natural set of swimming holes along the shoreline. Looking east towards the Coral Sea, it is the only place one can enjoy the island's saltwater – especially during low-tide, when the pools are lapped only by soft waves.

One of the island's more curious wonders is its 40 kilometres (25 miles) of

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

If faced with a dingo, keep still and cross your arms over your chest. Then, facing the dingo, slowly walk backwards.

Time zone	UTC+10
Best time to visit	July to November (for whale watching – August to October for humpbacks)
Currency	$ Australian Dollar

Useful sites

kingfisherbay.com
visitfrasercoast.com
fraserisland.net

> “The island’s most immediately staggering feature is its rainforest”

coloured sandy cliffs. Known as The Pinnacles, they are believed by the indigenous Butchulla people to have been created by the Rainbow Serpent. Heading south towards Eli Creek, 72 shades of sand dance from red to yellow, ushering in the wreck of the SS Maheno – an early turbine-driven steamer, which was swept away in 1935 while being dragged to Japan. It is just one of 23 ships to have been wrecked against Fraser Island between 1856 and 1935 – even after the construction of the island’s northern Sandy Cape Lighthouse in 1870.

Further afield, Hammerstone Sandblow, one of the island’s enormous, ever-shifting dunes, leads into Lake Wabby. The island’s deepest lake is also an anomaly – both technically a window lake, which sits beneath water level, and a barrage lake – formed when the Hammerstone created a natural dam against a creek. It is also the island’s only lake that supports aquatic life, but in the next century will most likely be swallowed by the dune that created it.

Altogether, the island’s lakes are exceptional in size, diversity and age. Inland, Fraser’s Lake McKenzie splits the rainforest, like an enormous oasis. The perched lake is fed not by groundwater but rainwater, sitting between dunes, atop the silky smooth white silica sand below – which not only filters the water crystal clear, but feels positively delightful beneath treading feet.

Lake Boomanjin is also a bizarre beast. Quieter than its counterparts, at 190 hectares (470 acres), it is both the world’s largest perched lake, and the highest, 130 metres (427 feet) above sea level. However, not content to break records, Boomanjin also boasts a surreal gradient of reddish hues – tea tree red, to be precise – an effect created by stripping tannin from the surrounding tea trees.

The island’s unusual landscapes have created a fittingly unfamiliar ecosystem, where the purest strain of eastern Australian dingoes call home. Roughly 50 mammals are spread across Fraser Island’s rainforests, mangroves, swamps, woodlands, heaths and shorelines. They include the elusive swamp wallaby, which scurries amid the scant grass and the sheepish short-beaked echidna, with its long spines.

Come evening, visitors can go on an open-air tour of the island’s all-night party critters. The island also counts around 80 types of reptile among its population, including 20 species of snake, ‘acid frogs’ accustomed to acidic water, and sand and lace monitors, which tend to linger around picnic areas.

Aside from hundreds of bird species, the island is also perfectly positioned for whale-watching excursions, as migrating humpbacks flee the Antarctic to give birth in Australia’s warmer waters. The only sight more delightful than humpback whales are humpback whales swimming alongside their calves – an example of life at the edge of the world.

Images: All Getty Images

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MINDFULNESS

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Purpose

FINDING PURPOSE WHEN YOU HAVE RETIRED

Retirement presents a number of challenges, including an unexpected amount of free time, and with it, perhaps, a loss of identity. Retirement could be the ideal time to tackle the big things you always wanted to do, explains Olly Tew

"Invest your time and energy into what is really important to you, and discover new things that you are truly excited about"

15

FIND PURPOSE
What do you want to do when you finally reach retirement?

Senior's Mindfulness
Meditate

UNDERSTANDING MEDITATION

Julie Bassett reveals what meditation is and how you can get started with this mindful practice

"Meditation can help you adapt calmly to any changes in your life"

Why meditate?

50
51

MEDITATION
Find out how meditating can improve your life and learn how to do it

Senior's Mindfulness
Recipes

WORLD CULINARY TOUR

Over the following pages, uncover delicious, hearty recipes from around the world that are as good for the soul as they are for your health

KULAJDA

Small on ingredients, but big on taste, this is a soup like no other

Servings 6
Prep Time 20 MINS
Cook Time 20 MINS

INGREDIENTS

RECIPE

TIP
If you're afraid of poached eggs, simply whisk the eggs all together and pour into the hot soup. Stir through until the egg is cooked.

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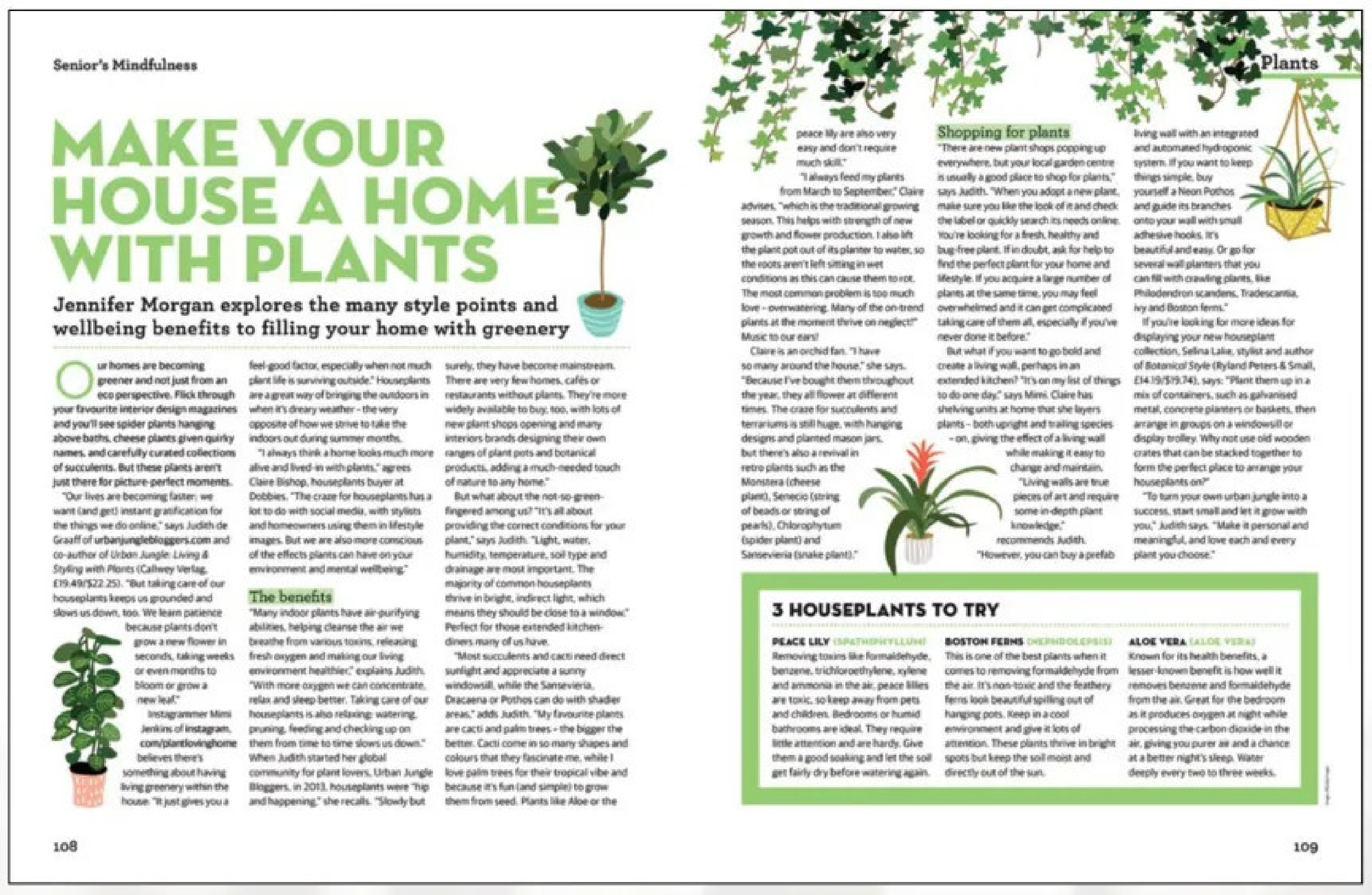
NOURISH THE SOUL
Hearty recipes from across the globe that'll make you feel great


Senior's Mindfulness
Plants

MAKE YOUR HOUSE A HOME WITH PLANTS

Jennifer Morgan explores the many style points and wellbeing benefits to filling your home with greenery

The benefits

Shopping for plants

3 HOUSEPLANTS TO TRY

PEACE LILY
BOSTON FERNS
ALOE VERA

108
109

POWER OF PLANTS
Improve your wellbeing and discover the mindful benefits of flowers

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